

## Introduction

• • •

Hollywood is one place in the world  
where you can die of encouragement.

—Dorothy Parker

This book answers the two questions we're asked most often by aspiring screenwriters at film and television workshops, lectures, and writers' conferences:

What's a treatment?

How do I write a treatment?

The answers provided in *Writing Treatments That Sell* are based on our own practical experience as screenwriters, literary managers, and producers (for TV and film)—as well as what we've learned from our development and editorial associates and clients at Atchity Editorial/Entertainment International, Inc., and AEI's Writers' Lifeline, Inc.

Our advice is descriptive rather than prescriptive, based on observations of industry practices rather than on philosophical principles. This means you should use what works for you and ignore the rest—because everyone who knows anything about show business knows that there are no hard-and-fast rules. Success comes through individual effort combined with access and luck (luck being just another word for timing). If you're serious about your writing career, you'll figure out everything

we say here on your own. We're just hoping to expedite your learning curve so you get where you want to go sooner rather than later—and with fewer painful detours.

The third frequently asked question that inspired us to write this book is "Why do I need a treatment?" The honest answer is "If you have already written a screenplay, or if you're very lucky, or both, you may not." But sooner or later, if you want to sell a story idea without writing the entire script, you'll need to know about treatments. If you're having story problems *now*, a treatment will help solve those problems. The two primary functions served by the treatment in today's entertainment business are *selling* and *diagnosing a story*.

Every storyteller dreams of seeing the characters in his story come alive each week on television or up on the silver screen. There's nothing more exciting! We've shared this happy experience with the writers we manage. A project called *Sign of the Watcher*, by Brett Bartlett, was rejected (under the title *Walk into My Parlor*) fourteen times in its first submission to buyers. AEI's Writers' Lifeline reevaluated Brett's story, used the treatment form to focus plot and characters, changed the title, and sent the treatment of the retooled story back out through Brett's manager-producer, Warren Zide. Several studios were intrigued enough by the treatment to request the full manuscript, which eventually sold to Propaganda Films for \$750,000. Was refocusing the story easy for the writer? No. It took months of reworking the characters and action line and rewriting—dozens of times—the treatment we used as our selling tool. It was the roller-coaster ride of Brett's life. Brett's journey began with the excitement of a great story idea, the dream of seeing his story become a film, then passed through the fright of the dips and sudden turns of rejection and rewriting, to the exhilaration of having hung on to the end, a little out of breath, a bit bruised but, damn, what a ride! And Brett's not the only one who's taken this ride.

With the proliferation of channels and new cinematic

distribution media, new writers are in demand now more than ever before. The Writers Guild reported that between 1985 and 1994, screenwriting accounted for 393 millionaires. The highest-paid 25 percent of employed writers earned more than \$575,000 each in 2000. "Writers' odds have never been better," according to Thom Taylor, writing in *ScreenWriter Quarterly*. But because an estimated 10,000 scripts are submitted to Hollywood every year, in those same nine years 90,000 scripts were read to produce those 393 big winners—and only 10 percent of the scripts submitted even get read. Those odds are 229 to 1. Still, we've always believed, and advise our writers to believe, that "the odds don't apply to us." We've written this book to help you stack the cards in your favor with inside industry information about the buying and selling of stories, and advice on how to use the treatment to accelerate your break into Hollywood.

Most people we know in the industry take their work very seriously. We certainly do. The game of creating images for the big and small screens is the most exciting one we know, and its players are intense. But though writing and selling your writing is a serious business with serious upside potential, don't get so serious that you forget the fun of creating. Creation, after all, is an adult form of play. Don't be so married to your way of playing that you can't consider making a change: a change that might sell your story, or that might sell it for more money. Keep yourself inspired by continuing to write while you market what you've already written; if one story doesn't sell today, it might tomorrow. And when you sell the first one for big bucks, all the others you've written suddenly become valuable commodities.

### TREATMENTS AS CLIFFHANGERS

Treatments should feel like pictures rushing together to form a story in which you can see the characters and hear them speak. A treatment should never read like a synopsis, like dull beats of a plot moving forward, trudging toward a predictable outcome. When you're reading the pages, however simple, the thrill of the story must be captured. And how do you do that? You forget that you're writing a treatment and tell the story like a classic around-the-campfire cliffhanger—as if every event happened before your very eyes and you can't wait to share it.

The structure should reveal itself like the design of the master architect crossed with a clever composer. The beginning immediately captivates. Why? Because you know exactly where to start the story because you have thought about it very carefully. And you know exactly whose face has just appeared on the screen. The character's journey should feel random and spontaneous, as if rolling down a hill, not a step-by-step contrivance of events.

The energy of the beginning should carry us into the middle—and now you're in trouble. The subplot has to subtly kick in here, and its momentum carries us through to the end.

An architect's blueprint or a sheet of music is dull only to those who do not have the passion to appreciate its execution. These "treatments" of a breathtaking building or a moving symphony should be just as exciting as seeing the Pantheon or hearing the Ninth Symphony for the first time. And this is your job. When you tell your story, you'll be like the projectionist alone in the dark booth, until the lights come back on again and then everyone understands—finally—exactly what you wanted to say.

—Victoria Wisdom, agent and partner,  
Becsey-Wisdom-Kaledjian

We start, in chapter 1, by examining exactly what a treatment is and how it's used in the industry to make a sale and/or to lay out a story. Here we also differentiate the treatment from its cousins the synopsis, the outline, the beat sheet, and the

coverage. Chapter 2 discusses original treatments for motion pictures, emphasizing the dramatic elements that effective treatments contain: hooks, climaxes, protagonist, conflict, action, scenes, theme, and character. We offer a summary outline of the motion picture's three-act structure that reminds you to ask yourself: Who's my protagonist? What's her problem? How does she overcome it?

Treatments for television, following their own special rules and with their distinctive seven-act structure, are the subject of chapter 3, in which we also consider television's need for subject matter to fit demographically specialized audiences. Chapter 3 also shows you how a television movie deal works, and how to get from treatment to deal. In chapter 4, we present the *bible*, as the treatment for a dramatic television series is known in the industry. Chapter 5 scrutinizes the writing of treatments "based on" true stories, "inspired by" true stories, and "from" true stories, and also tells you how to find and secure the rights to a true story. Adapting a novel to film is the subject of chapter 6, which offers, as an example of the adaptation treatment, *Shadow of the Cypress*, a modern retelling of *Jane Eyre*.

Once you know what a treatment is and how to write one for every occasion, *Writing Treatments* moves in chapter 7 to the crucial questions, Who are the buyers? and What are they buying? We deal here with both the complex and unpredictable television markets and the more stable feature film market. In presenting the latter, we tell you how to distinguish between *in-house production companies* and *independent producers*, and what to ask of each as you approach them with your story.

This leads naturally to a question we hear repeatedly: "How do I protect myself?" Chapter 8 answers the question both technically—by outlining copyright law and Writers Guild of America registration procedures—and practically, by letting you know what the actual industry practice is when a story is submitted for consideration. Our industry glossary will help

you interpret terms such as *turnaround*, *buzz*, and *right of first refusal*; and understand exactly what *option* and *high concept* mean. *Writing Treatments* concludes with a list of recommended further reading, which includes the sources we've drawn on in preparing this book.

Two final pieces of introductory advice: In learning about all the trees in the entertainment industry woods, don't lose sight of the woods themselves. As several coaches before us have pointed out, assuming timing is on your side, there are only two important considerations in making a solid sale: *concept* and *castability*. You have to have a great idea, with a "wow factor" of 7 to 10 (on a scale of 10), if you want to break into show business in a big way. *High concept* means an idea so clearly focused that it can be expressed in few words, like "Jurassic shark," the pitch we used to sell Steve Alten's *Meg* to Walt Disney Pictures and Doubleday-Bantam. The second element is *castability*, which simply means creating a protagonist that every top star in the business will want to play. Focus on those two, and, with the help of the practical techniques presented in this book, you will find your way into the fold.

Our second piece of final advice is *Maintain your optimism*. According to Jack Valenti, entertainment copyrights—which begin with you, the writer—were worth \$89 billion in 2001. Optimism is the only faith capable of sustaining the daily ups and downs of the screenwriter's life; besides that, it's the attitude your successful entertainment industry colleagues will recognize as their own, and for which they'll respect you the most. You'll succeed in this business if you believe you'll succeed, and after you make an irrevocable commitment to continue writing and marketing your stories until your success is acknowledged by both buyers and audience. See yourself receiving that first Emmy or Oscar. And don't forget to send us our commission!

## 1

## The Nature and Role of the Treatment

. . .

I read part of it all the way through.

—Samuel Goldwyn

The key to closing a deal in Hollywood is getting a *player* (as deal makers are called) to read your work. Since the entertainment industry is so personal and depends on access to buyers—like a vice president at a network, a development executive at a star's or director's production company, or the president of a studio—the sequence of events by which a seller convinces a buyer generally begins with a chance encounter or a telephone conversation that conveys urgency. Ideally, the buyer responds by saying, "Okay, send it over."

"Promise me you'll read it yourself."

"I promise," the buyer lies, or maybe even means it at the time. "How long is it?"

"Three hundred pages."

"Do you have a treatment?"

"Yes."

"Good. Why don't you send that along, too?"

Because the buyer rarely has time to read a screenplay or a novel without knowing what he's about to read, the treatment very often becomes the most important tool in the selling sequence.

When community education courses advertise "Sell your ideas to TV," they mislead inexperienced writers who don't understand that the word *ideas* is being used loosely. The inexperienced writer doesn't sell an idea. Instead, he must write his idea *at least* into a treatment and try to get it into the hands of an active filmmaker. Second only to writing an entire screenplay or teleplay "on spec" (the industry term for "speculative work done without a contract"), your treatment may be the best tool for getting a foot in the door of moviemaking.

But the treatment is a strange animal, quite unlike any other kind of writing. If a screenplay focuses the story for a film, the treatment does the same thing for a screenplay. Yet there are as many kinds of treatments as there are writers. None of this confusion helps the new writer trying to break into the business, but for the outsider's purposes, what distinguishes one treatment from another is simply its effectiveness in making the sale, and/or laying out the story.

With the proliferation of cable programming, the expansion of video rentals, and the industry's acutely competitive need for films and programs to fill home and theatrical screens, the function of the treatment in today's motion picture and television industries has expanded. The usefulness of the treatment is behind the scenes, in developing a story; and/or in pitching it efficiently to filmmakers who might be sold on making the writer's story into a film.

A script is a selling tool; it's not a blueprint for a movie, in spite of what they tell you. Screenplays ought to be sold as prose. It's entirely about storytelling, explaining that story to the reader.

—Kurt Wimmer

Treatments can help the writer acquire an overview of his story, presenting the profile of the woods in contrast to the varied texture of the trees. By the same token, for a story editor or

development executive the treatment is a useful diagnostic tool for getting the story straight. By reading a short treatment, the editor obtains a perspective that may be lost when reading a faulty script.

Nothing can take the place of a live pitch, where the writer dramatizes his story for an attentive audience. But a written pitch is still needed to assist in the next stage of the filmmaking process, where the story is "repitched" to the next person higher up along the chain of production. When an oral pitch is impossible, a written pitch can do the job. (The treatment is a written pitch.) Everything we say in this book is intended to assist you, the writer, in understanding and creating the treatment to serve one or the other, or both, of these two crucial purposes.

*For our purposes then, a treatment is a relatively brief, loosely narrative written pitch of a story intended for production as a film for theatrical exhibition or television broadcast. Written in user-friendly, dramatic, but straightforward and highly visual prose, in the present tense, the treatment highlights in broad strokes your story's hook, primary characters, acts and action line, setting, point of view, and most dramatic scenes and turning points.*

## The Key Elements of a Treatment

Let's take a closer look at the key elements that make a good treatment:

**"relatively brief":** A treatment's brevity or length is relative to the writer's purpose at hand. A top network executive, such as the Vice President of Motion Pictures for Television, may request a one-page treatment; his boss, the Senior Vice President of Motion Pictures for Television, may need only one paragraph. The writer may have started with a twenty-page treatment, which he used to clarify the story elements as he was thinking them through.

**"loosely narrative":** A treatment both *tells* and *shows* a story, moving from one to the other as the writer sees fit in his overall aim of helping his audience—whether an individual buyer from a network or studio, or the ultimate consumer in front of the tube or in the theater—visualize the story and become involved with its emotional content. It's "loose," because the rules for writing a treatment aren't hard and fast. The closest analogy we can think of is a vivid and intense letter to your best friend relating a series of amazing events that you've just experienced.

**"pitch":** This word describes the act of relaying a story for the purpose of selling it to the person listening to you. You spontaneously pitch the movie *Joe Somebody* to your best friend if you enjoyed it and are urging her to go see it. The director or producer at a friendly business lunch with the studio president pitches the story he's most excited about in answer to the question, "What are you working on these days?"

**"user-friendly":** The best treatments are easy on the eye. A treatment looks much like a short story because it's written in paragraph form, uses quotation marks for dialogue, and omits the technicalities of screenplay format. Use wide margins, a standard typeface, and short paragraphs rather than long ones. Leave a line of space between each paragraph, instead of indenting them.

**"dramatic":** A treatment is not an essay or a school composition filled with rhetorical and syntactical niceties. It's more closely comparable to an advertising campaign. The prose must be dramatic, or the treatment fails. Dramatic qualities include focus, intensity, dialogue, concrete characterization, and, most of all, *action*. Phrases like "the story starts with" or "in this act we see" serve no purpose in a well-written treatment. Instead, a treatment might open with:

The black limousine hurtles around the corner and slams to a stop at the front steps of the courthouse.

It's not "a" limousine or "a" corner, but "the" limousine and "the" corner because your intention is to make your reader believe that this story, with all its concrete details, is coming to life before his eyes as he reads.

**"straightforward":** The treatment's language is simple and unpretentious; its sentences forceful and declarative. The language draws no attention to itself, intent upon presenting only what will push the action forward.

**"highly visual prose":** Remember, your purpose in a treatment is to show us the pictures or scenes by which this story can be brought to life. Use your skill to evoke these pictures in as few words as possible.

**"present tense":** Writing in the present tense places your audience immediately in the action rather than distancing them. In the example given, note that the limousine "hurtles" and "slams to a stop."

**"highlights":** The treatment needn't include every single detail that the screenplay will spell out. It must include all the highlights, the *necessary* details (often called "obligatory scenes") without which the story makes no sense to the audience or reader. Highlighting must be positive. The treatment is not a critique and should contain no qualifiers or uncertainties.

**"broad strokes":** Please don't kill us with detail. The human mind can only absorb so much new information at a time. Stay focused on the most important elements of the story, remembering that your purpose is to tease your reader into asking for more detail—or for the screenplay.

**"hook":** What makes this story's approach to its subject matter different from other stories on the same subject? That difference or angle is what will hook your audience and, for that reason, your buyer.

**"primary characters, acts and action line, setting, and point of view":** By the time your prospective buyer has finished reading your treatment, he should clearly understand the main character or characters, the general shape of your story's

action line, the impact of its setting on its development, and the attitude toward its subject matter. The treatment generally indicates, implicitly or overtly, the act breaks for a feature film (three acts) or movie for television (seven acts).

**“most dramatic scenes”:** Skip the transitions and skim over the background scenes or “back story.” Just give us the obligatory scenes required to imagine the overall shape of the story.

**“turning points”:** Turning points or “twists” are moments in the story when the characters move into some kind of jeopardy under the impulse of previous events and their character makeup. A twist is an unexpected turning point that surprises the audience. Turning points include *cliffhangers*, used to propel the audience from one act to another.

**“intended for production”:** Never forget that the intention of the treatment is to initiate the process of filmmaking. In filmmaking, as screenwriter William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Marathon Man*) put it, “Nobody knows anything.” This means that there are no true rights or wrongs in creating effective treatments. The best treatments are great because their writers are expert dramatists.

**“theater or television”:** A treatment for each medium should follow rules prescribed by that medium. A film treatment, with its three acts, may perplex television executives worried about TV’s traditional seven-act structure. A television treatment will trouble theatrical developers until it has been restructured for their audience.

A treatment generally varies in length from one to twenty-five or more pages, depending on the kind of treatment it is and its purpose. The treatment of the motion picture *One-Night Stand* with Wesley Snipes and Nastassia Kinski that garnered writer Joe Eszterhas (*Basic Instinct*) \$2.5 million from New Line Cinema (with another \$1.5 million to be paid on production) was four and a half pages long. AEI (with Zide Films) sold Steve Alten’s *Meg* to Walt Disney Pictures for \$700,000 based on

a hundred sample pages of the novel and a fifteen-page treatment of the rest of the story by screenwriter Tom Wheeler.

The typical treatment for a television movie is seven to fifteen pages; for a feature film ten to twenty pages.

## The Brief, Happy Life of the Treatment

Although there are as many scenarios for a Hollywood script sale as there are personalities in Hollywood, a typical sequence involving a “spec” script—one that you’ve written on your own, without being paid—goes like this:

1. The development executive, whose job is “acquisitions” of new “material,” reads the treatment you sent over with your script (as described in the conversation on page 7).
  - **YES.** He likes the subject matter and the writing and decides to read the script himself. Or he asks the assistant whose taste most closely mirrors his own to give it a “quick read.”
  - **NO.** He can tell from the subject matter or from the writing (or both) that it’s “not for us.” He sends the script back with a note to that effect.
2. The reader’s report, known as *coverage*, comes back.
  - **YES.** The coverage is positive. So the development executive reads the script himself. Or he proceeds to the next step immediately.
  - **NO.** The reader’s report is negative. Depending on how negative it is and why, the executive either gets another reader’s opinion, or he sends the script back with a polite note. Since no one in Hollywood wants to close doors, he most likely “passes” on the script rather than rejecting it.
3. The development executive, using your treatment as a crib sheet, pitches the story idea to his boss, who is either the

head of development, the head of production, or the owner of the company.

- *NO*. The boss isn't interested ("We have another one too similar already in development"; "The networks aren't doing any more drug-related stories"; "Sorry, it doesn't grab me"). The development executive sends the script back to you.
  - *MAYBE*. The boss is intrigued. "Is there a treatment?" she says. The development executive hands her your treatment. "I'll get back to you."
  - *YES*. The boss likes it. If she has the power to say yes, she asks the development executive to set up a meeting with you.
4. The development executive calls you (or your agent or manager) to say, "We like the story very much and would like to meet."
  5. At the meeting you are praised for your story and given "notes" from the development executive and/or from his boss. Your willingness to accommodate these notes in a subsequent rewrite influences their decision to move forward or not.
    - *YES*. You seem like a fun person to work with and are flexible enough to understand and address their story concerns. It's obvious from hearing you talk about the story that you've considered it from every angle, and they're eager to work with you.
    - *NO*. You seem to be bent on an "authorial" stance, reluctant to change anything in your masterpiece. You or your agent/manager calls for a "follow up," and you receive a call back a week later saying, "We've decided to move in another direction."
  6. A day or two after the meeting, the executive calls you or your agent and says, "We'd like to move forward with this. Who do we talk to?" You have a deal! The next step is business. You put the executive in touch with your attorney or your agent/manager to negotiate their offer.

- *NO*. The negotiations go badly. You can't come to terms. The deal falls apart, usually because of the new writer's unrealistic expectations or his agent/manager's lack of experience.
- *YES*. The deal is done. Even before you sign it, you may very well move to the next step.

7. Your executive (now you refer to him as "my executive at . . .") calls for a development meeting. At this meeting, you discuss modifications to the story. You agree to undertake the modifications. The executive asks you, first, to write a new treatment that reflects the changes so he can see them in the context of the whole story before you go through the painstaking work of revising the script itself. The treatment, in one form or another, continues to be used as a diagnostic tool until the final, or shooting, script is accepted.

### Kinds of Treatments

In both television and major motion picture filmmaking, the three most common kinds of treatments are:

1. **Original dramatic treatments:** These are treatments of dramatic stories invented by writers. (Chapter 2 deals at length with these.)
2. **Treatments of true stories:** These show how the writer would turn fact into drama, organizing actual events and characters to create a compelling story line. Think about Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* and how he made a visually exciting movie based on the exploits of the thirteenth-century Scottish hero William Wallace. Or the heartwarming *Fly Away Home* with Anna Paquin and Jeff Daniels, which dramatized the true story of a man who taught endangered geese their migratory route. (Chapter 5 deals at length with these treatments.)



**3. Adaptation treatments:** These show how a writer would dramatize an existing story by another writer. A treatment for adapting *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott might convince a studio to develop a script for a remake. Producer Denise DiNovi did indeed produce a very successful screen version of *Little Women* starring Winona Ryder and Susan Sarandon. Emma Thompson won an Academy Award for her first attempt at screenwriting, an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. And Alicia Silverstone's catapult to stardom, *Clueless*, was an innovative, hip, '90s version of Austen's *Emma*. (We deal with adaptations in chapter 6.)

### Confusing Terms

As we mentioned earlier, the term *treatment* is thrown around loosely in the film and TV world and has been used from time to time by development or creative executives, writers, and business affairs persons to mean variously a one-pager, a synopsis, an outline or "beat sheet," or a coverage. But there are some differences in these forms, as follows:

#### Treatment v. Synopsis

*Synopsis* is the term used by those in the entertainment industry to indicate a matter-of-fact summation of a story's plotline, a shorter version of a longer work, whether that work is a novel, a nonfiction book, a screenplay, or even a treatment. Think of the synopsis as a more or less complete and detailed recitation of all the scenes and events in a story, a condensed version of the plot. The purpose of the synopsis is to describe, not to sell. The treatment's purpose is to sell, and that's why it's written with an intensity and urgency the synopsis characteristically lacks.

#### Treatment v. Coverage

*Coverage* is the industry term used to describe the diagnostic document provided by the story department readers for executives making acquisition decisions in theatrical film and television. The typical coverage document consists of:

- identifying information (name of story, name of writer, name of person doing the coverage, type of story, etc.);
- a synopsis, as previously defined;
- a set of comments giving the reader's opinion of the cinematic worthiness of the piece covered;
- a rating chart, allowing the reader to rate the piece on characterization, dialogue, action, setting, and commercial appeal.

A script may be covered by:

- a talent agency for casting purposes;
- a talent agency, for *packaging* (the term for attaching talent—an actor, actress, or director);
- a director, actor, or actress's company to assess its suitability for involvement;
- a production company, to assess a film's viability;
- an agent or manager, to help determine whether the writer should be represented or the work produced.

The coverage's purpose is to report the strong and weak points of a story as objectively and comprehensively as possible. But a treatment, drawing its energy from its writer's personal enthusiasm, is *not* objective.

#### The Beat Sheet

A beat sheet is a writing tool used to identify the sequence of events, turning points, and action in your story. It's an abbreviated way (no longer than three pages, please) to break down

the structure of your story, making it easier to organize and change.

The beat sheet charts the sequence of events that cause your main character to do something and maps how your main character changes from the beginning to the end of your story.

Create a beat sheet by using bullet points that illustrate in one or two lines the order of your plot's progression. Remember, plot takes place when a character does something or acts upon another character.

Here is an example of a beat sheet for AEI:

### JUDAS SILVER

by Jon Hargrove

- A tight-knit group of six graduate students, all best friends, are conducting a historical excavation of a colonial church in Boston. The church recently burned down. They are led by an eccentric professor. The students are history grad students.
- Beneath the new church, one of the grad students comes across a previously unknown room: in fact, it's a crypt.
- They enter the room, which is burned and destroyed, and unstable at best. Dirt sifts down from above. Timbers creak. The professor finds an unusual leather pouch of coins buried with one of the corpses. He picks up the bag.
- Immediately the room starts to collapse. The students make it out, but the professor is killed. His hand, the only part of him not buried, is still clutching the bag of coins.
- The six shocked students attend the professor's funeral.
- Days later, the six students gather in tribute to their killed professor. They gather inside his office at the university, drinking, remembering the old man.
- The professor's wife arrives, grieving. She hands them the bag of coins found on the professor's body. Since the coins are part of the excavation, she wants the students to have them to further their research.
- They open the bag and count out thirty silver coins, all ancient.

Could they be the thirty coins used to betray Christ? Some of the students scoff at the idea, but others believe it.

- One of the students, Gerald, an intern at the Boston Museum, has had considerable experience in dating artifacts. He tests the coins and concludes that they are over two thousand years old.

- Valery, a student at the Harvard Divinity School, uses history books to place the coins. She's confident that they are from the time of Christ.

- Two of the students, Robert and Piers, go out on the town. Robert immediately gets into a fight at a local club and is stabbed to death.

- The remaining five friends are in shock, horrified. Two deaths in one week. Julie, who's into the arcane and the occult, does some more research. She discovers that the Judas coins are thought to be cursed, and she's beginning to believe it.

- Sheila brings in a numismatist, who states that the coins could potentially be worth millions if sold to the right collector. The coins have only been rumored to exist. They have on their hands a major find.

- The students argue over who should oversee the coins, now that they know the coins are valuable. They quickly begin losing trust in one another. They decide to use the museum's safe.

- Later, Piers and Julie, who are engaged to be married and have known each other since they were kids, suggest that they sell the coins and share the money. But Sheila reminds them that the coins are not theirs to sell. They belong to the parish, and she thinks they should give the coins back.

- That night the others find Sheila dead, fallen from her fifth-floor dorm room. Her death is ruled a suicide by the police.

- The remaining four students secretly wonder if Sheila's death was truly a suicide. None of them have alibis.

- Piers is losing it. He believes the coins are cursed and need to be destroyed. Julie and Gerald go to the museum to find the coins—but the coins are gone.

- They all suspect each other of stealing the coins, which leads to another murder.

- The three remaining students decide to toss the coins into the Atlantic. Just as they are about to do so, Gerald turns a gun on them.

- They fight and Gerald is killed, falling overboard, leaving only Piers and Julie.

- Piers turns around to see his fiancée Julie holding a gun on him.

She wants the coins. He tosses them to her, and she promptly pulls the trigger.

- Alone, with five of her onetime best friends now dead, Julie turns the sailboat back to shore.

- In the distance a storm is coming, and the seas are choppy. Lightning illuminates the entire sky, revealing ominous thunderheads. The little sailboat rises and falls on the massive swells, standing little chance against nature's fury—and the curse of the coins.

THE END

### Treatment v. Outline

The words *outline* or *reblocking* are used to describe a list of the scenes in a cinematic story, much like the beat sheet. Outlines of this kind are especially useful in the development process because they reveal the flow of the scenes, without elaboration, at a glance. An outline can be thought of as a skeletal treatment. Where a treatment may contain dialogue to dramatize a particular moment, the outline will not. Its purpose is strictly diagnostic, to allow the executive, the director, and the producers to chart the direction of a story and to make course corrections before the writer is fully committed to writing or rewriting.

The following example is a partial outline for our Disney film, *Meg*:

1. Seventy million years ago, T-Rex attacked and destroyed by *Megalodon*.
2. Professor Jonas Baxter finishes lecture on Meg. Terry Tenaka tries to get his attention.
3. Jonas attends media awards party. Learns his wife is cheating on him, walks out. Terry Tenaka is waiting for him.

In the next chapter we will discuss how to write an original treatment for motion pictures, while at the same time examining the basic elements of fiction and drama.

## 2

### The Big Screen: Original Treatments for Motion Pictures

• • •

Make it new.

—Ezra Pound

Walt Disney Pictures has paid \$700,000 against \$1.5 million . . . for the first hundred pages and treatment of an unfinished novel.

After heated bidding during the past few days, the publishing house of Bantam-Doubleday-Dell obtained the rights to two novels by a first-time novelist for \$2.1 million—one of which is still in treatment form.

Wouldn't you love to read those words about your story? Our client Steve Allen did! His dream of making it as a writer came true when after twenty rejections for representation, his "idea" for a novel titled *White Death* about a prehistoric shark found its way to our office. Steve spent ten years researching the sixty-foot *Megalodon Carcharodon* while working days at a meat processing plant in South Florida. His awesome idea was swimming in the depths of 450 dense pages complete with every known fact about the *Megalodon* and its environment. We clearly saw the potential, but Steve needed to

KENNETH ATCHITY • CHI-LI WONG

# WRITING TREATMENTS THAT SELL

• • • • •

How to Create and Market  
Your Story Ideas to the  
Motion Picture and TV Industry

SECOND EDITION

An Owl Book  
Henry Holt and Company • New York



Henry Holt and Company, LLC

*Publishers since 1866*

115 West 18th Street  
New York, New York 10011

Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of  
Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Copyright © 1997, 2003 by Kenneth Atchity and Chi-Li Wong  
All rights reserved.

Distributed in Canada by H. B. Fenn and Company Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Atchity, Kenneth John.

Writing treatments that sell : how to create and market  
your story ideas to the motion picture and TV industry /  
Kenneth Atchity & Chi-Li Wong.—Rev. Owl Books ed.

p. cm.

“An Owl Book.”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8050-7278-0 (pbk.)

1. Motion picture authorship. 2. Television authorship.

3. Treatments (Motion pictures, television, etc.)

I. Wong, Chi-Li. II. Title.

PN1996.A84 2003

808.2'3—dc21

2002027556

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions and  
premiums. For details contact: Director, Special Markets.

First Edition 1997

Second Edition 2003

Printed in the United States of America

5 7 9 10 8 6

## Contents

. . .

Acknowledgments to the First Edition xi

Introduction 1

### 1 • The Nature and Role of the Treatment 7

The Key Elements of a Treatment 9

The Brief, Happy Life of the Treatment 13

Kinds of Treatments 15

Confusing Terms 16

### 2 • The Big Screen:

*Original Treatments for Motion Pictures* 21

What Makes a Great Treatment? 22

The Writer's Storyboard 24

Action or Story 27

Not Just Action, Dramatic Action 28

What's the Hook? 34

The Thematic Core of Your Story 35

The Centrality of Characters 37

Types of Characters 38