

— WRITING SAMPLE —

(screenplays - treatments)

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The Prometheus Effect

**Treatment /Step-Outline
for feature film or television mini-series**

An epic hard-core science-fiction thriller

**By
Stephen X. Arthur**

Editorial Note:

This story was written *prior* to the publishing of
Carl Sagan's *Contact* (1985)
and Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990).

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1.

The film opens in a large, secluded Florida cove as two dolphins cavort underwater with DONNA, a scientist. She lives with these intelligent beings in the hope that such intimate rapport will finally bridge the communication gap. Donna shares her meager quarters with her lover, BURGESS, an astronomer working on another communication gap: he searches for messages from the stars. Sitting at a terminal linked directly to an orbiting radio-telescope, Burgess is pleading over the phone to a sponsor who plans to cut his funding. His method is very important, he explains, because unlike NASA, which is searching the nearby stars, he is looking at other galaxies: a signal from one of these would be much weaker, but also much more likely to be found (because billions of stars are covered at one time). Burgess is a man enraptured by the infinite cosmos and what it may contain, while cynical and resentful toward the “real world”.

The cove is reachable only by sea, and from the sea comes a visitor, a dolphin with an electrode imbedded in its skull. Donna grimaces as her two dolphin friends speak in animated whistles with the new arrival. This dolphin is part of a heartless experiment by another scientist in the area, DR. WALKER. It's an experiment in remote control of dolphins to mine the ocean floor, and whatever this dolphin tells the others, it makes them edge away from Donna, bringing tears to her eyes.

2.

Soon, a miracle occurs. Burgess actually receives a transmission: a complex message from the Andromeda galaxy, so distant it's taken two million years to reach us (though it's been broadcast repeatedly for millenia). Burgess stares at his screen, stunned.

Meanwhile, the National Security Agency, routinely monitoring the satellite, reacts with alarm. The Director of Central Intelligence is notified. As Donna and Burgess celebrate the joyous discovery, CIA agents arrive; they confiscate the tape of the message and notify Burgess that he can have nothing further to do with it since it has now been classified top secret and is to be deciphered by the NSA. Burgess, furious, retrieves a copy of the tape after they leave and vows to decipher it and make it public: this message is from a civilization undoubtedly more advanced than our own and the world must know the true content of the message—how can we trust the CIA?—and though he faces imprisonment, the world will know that he discovered it.

3.

CUT TO: The birth of a real live dinosaur. Reporters clamour and flashes pop as two scientists, ALAN and COLUMBUS, explain how they brought this extinct animal to life: Many millions of years ago, insects got caught in tree sap; the tree sap became fossilized as amber, preserving the insects all this time. Alan, a molecular geneticist, had isolated an intact blood cell from the stomach of one such

fly, a blood cell that came from a dinosaur the fly had bitten. Columbus, a brain researcher, has been using weak electromagnetic fields to produce startling changes in emotion, behaviour, and growth; he used such a field to catalyze and speed up the cloning and growth of the dinosaur from that single cell.

Alan is often mistaken for a whiz-kid or a student because of his boyish looks and naivete, but in fact he's over thirty. Dr. Columbarti, nicknamed Columbus, is a natural leader and man of the world. At this press conference the two of them now announce that they plan to clone yet another cell found in the stomach of another fly, a mysterious cell from an unidentifiable animal.

4.

DISSOLVE TO: Alan and Columbus try to spark the mystery cell into life, to make it divide and grow. But something is very wrong—the composition of this cell is bizarre; its DNA, its molecules, all of this cell is like nothing seen before. They have to work like mad to synthesize special chemicals for this cell to feed on, to grow from... this creature could never have evolved on Earth...

5.

DISSOLVE TO: Press conference, Alan and Columbus. They explain that unfortunately the mystery cell decomposed before they could find out anything about it; they can say no more until they've studied the remains more closely. CUT TO: Alan and Columbus as they sneak into a secluded laboratory ... there before them, in a glass, surrogate womb, floats the growing embryo of the creature they've cloned—an alien. Cloned from a being who visited Earth long before the dawn of Man.

Alan is in torment over keeping the creature secret, but Columbus is adamant—he knows from experience what can happen when a discovery gets into the wrong hands — CUT TO:

6.

The Director of Central Intelligence is inspecting a heavily guarded Florida military installation that houses some sort of new technology. A prominent PHYSICIST shows the Director a videotape. The video shows Columbus in his lab giving a demonstration. An assistant stands under a large makeshift "halo", a simple ring of wire, and Columbus turns on a generator. Instantly the assistant is put into a kind of "time warp"—he perceives every action a full minute *after* it happens, so his reactions are totally out of sync and he's as disoriented as a person could ever get. Columbus turns it off and explains to the camera: we all normally live in a half-second time delay—that's how long it takes us to process our experience before we become conscious of it; he has simply discovered an electromagnetic wave-form that prolongs this natural process.

Columbus's work has since been classified top secret. The Physicist assures the Director that the effect is now ready to be applied over the whole world at once—he shows off the huge electrodes on either side of Florida, which turn the ocean into a giant transmitter. If this giant field were to be turned on, the U.S. could launch a first strike nuclear attack on Russia and the Russians would be unable to retaliate ... the Director boards his jet and takes off — CUT TO:

7.

The Situation Room, as the Director of Central Intelligence joins a meeting of the Special Group, the little-known directorate of military and intelligence men who decide on major actions by the intelligence "community". Their discussion reveals that Russia has also monitored Burgess's message from Andromeda and is trying to decipher it. Further insinuations reveal that this alien message may just prove to be the excuse they need to justify a first strike on Russia...

8.

Back to Burgess, sweating feverishly over his video display—he gets something: an image, an image of a very, very, alien face.

DISSOLVE TO: the alien, now a baby (growth speeded up by the field)—and it matches with the image Burgess got.

Imagine the body of a three-armed kangaroo whose tail can double as a third leg. Imagine a head with two large cartoonish eyes and two large cartoonish ears, bearing an uncanny resemblance to Mickey Mouse. When this baby gets upset, it emits powerful microwave radiation and the two scientists get dangerously sick—they realize that the "eyes" are really microwave transmitters and the "ears" are really microwave receivers; it "sees" as though the world is lit by its own searchlight. (It can also hear and vocalize by sound.) Alan and Columbus have to teach it not to boost its power when it's upset. (They guess it must come from a planet so foggy that ordinary light is useless for seeing.)

Burgess has hit a brick wall—he simply cannot crack the rest of the message, he can't find the key to deciphering it. It may, he speculates, require an alien mind...

9.

Within weeks the alien is a young adult. Alan and Columbus have carefully nursed it, synthesizing the food it needs, teaching it to walk and fend for itself, but although it's obviously very intelligent they've been unable to teach it language. It can vocalize over a large range and can even mimic individual words, but when it attempts to string words together they don't make sense. Columbus is distraught; he figures that the alien will soon pass the receptive stage and never learn to speak. Then, he gets a hunch...

10.

A boat arrives at Donna's cove—it's Alan and Columbus with a large crate. In the privacy of Donna's quarters, they reveal to her and Burgess the alien. Their hope is that Donna may have better luck since she's an expert at trying to communicate with an "alien" species, the dolphin. One can imagine the initial shock for Donna, and particularly for Burgess: it's unbelievably coincidental that this cloned alien from the past could be from the same civilization that sent the message (which he tells them of).

11.

To their surprise, the alien and the dolphins really hit it off—the alien swims with the dolphins, vocalizing with the same clicks and whistles. Soon it's clear that the alien is learning the dolphin's language with ease. Now there's communication between dolphin and alien, yet neither can communicate with humans.

12.

Again they're visited by the dolphin from Dr. Walker's experiment. This time, however, we see a tiny television camera attached to the electrode on its head. CUT TO a video image from the dolphin's POV and pull back to see that the CIA are keeping an eye on Burgess by way of Walker's dolphins. The CIA and Walker are shocked, of course, to detect the alien. As they discuss what action to take, someone mentions that the dolphins appear extremely intelligent. Not wanting public opinion to sway against his abuse of the dolphins, Walker advises them to kill the alien and re-clone it later under "properly controlled conditions". They can send in a remotely-controlled dolphin with a bomb and make it look like an accident due to faulty navigating. The existence of the alien can then be kept secret and Columbus et al will be none the wiser.

13.

A dolphin is sent in with a bomb. The bomb is detected and Columbus whisks the alien out of the way of the blast.

Strangely enough, a trauma like this was just what the alien needed—"Now I understand," it says. It seems the dolphin's and alien's natural way of thinking is so much more holistic ("right-brained") and non-aggressive that the alien couldn't understand human language until the dolphins had told it what they know about humans and it had witnessed an aggressive act that made it all "click".

14.

We see the CIA closing in now: Dr. Walker and a woman CIA agent posing as a coast guard officer aboard a small boat.

Suspecting foul play, the scientists rush to hide the alien—but Burgess fights them—he insists on getting the alien to look at the message—this may be his only chance to decipher it. The conflict escalates to the point that Burgess locks the alien in his room with him to play the message.

Walker and the agent launch their boat. CUT TO underwater as a line is hooked to the back of the boat—a KGB frogman is tailing them underwater. (Hanging onto the end of a long rope, he uses a small winglike board to keep himself submerged.)

15.

As the boat closes in, the alien puzzles over the strange digital code. Finally, it sees the key to translating the code. With this information, Burgess is able to quickly program a rough translation into English. The message is a whole encyclopedia of information, but the first part is crucial: Each civilized planet so far has destroyed itself (as we may be on the brink of doing) except for the one who sent this message. (This explains the coincidence of finding an ancient alien from the same planet—these are the only space-traveling aliens.) The way they avoided self-destruction was this: by permanently erasing the programming in the primitive part of the brain that predicts aggression and territorial urges. This part of the brain's programming was erased by the use of a weak electro-magnetic field (like Columbus's) that has a complex wave-form. That wave-form is included in the message.

Alan, Burgess, Donna, and Columbus are entranced, imagining what would happen if we could apply this method, nicknamed the Prometheus Effect, to mankind...

16.

Walker and the CIA woman dock in Donna's cove. But the dolphins interfere—they cause the KGB frogman to be discovered. There's a chase and a shootout. Walker is killed. The CIA woman and the KGB man lose each other. Both close in on Donna and Burgess's quarters... Meanwhile:

17.

The scientists know that the CIA are approaching. Columbus figures, from what he knows of the alien's brain, that he can adapt the alien's wave-form to work on humans. They decide to test it on the intruders. Hastily they rig up a signal generator and a large conducting cable around the ceiling while Columbus does the math to translate the wave-form to human use and Donna hides the alien.

18.

They lure the agents into the vicinity of the field...

At first they're ready to shoot each other, but then a strange transformation takes place. They both become dazed, then clear-headed again, and it's obvious they're

experiencing something tremendous: what they've been doing no longer makes sense to them, they want to cooperate...

19.

Both the Soviets and the U.S. have deciphered the message, says the KGB man, and the KGB knows for certain that those in the Special Group are afraid of the Soviets using the Prometheus effect to attain world communism. So afraid, in fact, that they're preparing to launch a first strike against Russia at any moment. But how could they, without risking mutual annihilation? Columbus knows how—by using the world-wide time delay, just what he was afraid of. At this they realize there's only one thing they can do to stop the annihilation of millions of people in Russia—as well as preventing any future destruction, ever again...

20.

The CIA woman returns with faked remains of the alien (for re-cloning). Burgess, Columbus, Alan, and the KGB man take off in their boat while Donna stays with the alien. The CIA woman then rejoins the other four and they head for the military installation we saw before.

21.

Donna speaks with the dolphins, using the alien as interpreter. She learns that every dolphin carries in its memory the entire history of the dolphin race, as though it had lived every life itself. This is because any dolphin can transmit to another dolphin exactly what it has seen and heard by reproducing the sonar signals that it "sees" with.

22.

Armed with the espionage agents' bag of tricks, the scientists and the agents begin to infiltrate the military installation.

Meanwhile: a biologist brought in by the CIA discovers the trickery with the sample. CIA gunmen take off for Donna's cove.

23.

They succeed in infiltrating the installation. Spying on a central control room, they see a counter ticking off the time left before the effect is turned on and the missiles are then launched: one hour left.

24.

They proceed to the field generator itself, but are caught by a guard and the Physicist who has applied Columbus's effect on a worldwide scale. They plead with the Physicist, trying to explain the bizarre sequence of events than brought them here.

Meanwhile: Donna is warned by the dolphins of the CIA's approach. The alien flees underwater with the dolphins.

25.

During their explanation to the Physicist it becomes clear that he does not know a first strike is about to be launched. The Physicist knocks out the guard and they hastily substitute the Prometheus wave-form for the time-delay one.

Back at the cove, the CIA arrive to find nothing. The alien swims free with the dolphins.

The counter hits zero.

DISSOLVE TO the blue Earth.