

Writing and Formatting a Synopsis...

The very thought of reducing your 60,000-150,000 word manuscript down to a few pages can be overwhelming, to say the least. Even the wonderment of writing such a synopsis has put many a writer close to a nervous breakdown. It really isn't necessary to go through all the angst if you follow a few important steps.

There are many ways to write a synopsis. The following are only guidelines until you find even better information or a better technique for yourself, to fit in with the way you work. Everyone has their own unique style and each person approaches their work differently.

In today's market, publishing houses are inundated with submissions from everyone who thinks they can write the great American novel or the great International novel. Due to time constraints, editors have very little time to spare to read manuscripts, unless the manuscripts are exceptional. Your work has to have an immediate hook to get an editor's attention with your query and your synopsis. Long synopsis filled with complicated paragraphs about settings, characters, secondary characters, outer conflict, inner conflict, black moments, and/or two or three entire plot sequences can cause an editor to cry for days and days. Any wonder so many editors have such short fuses.

Below are a few suggestions to help an author condense a manuscript into a meaningful synopsis, one which gives the editor an idea of your writing style and the pacing of your story. Next to the query letter, this will be the most important selling tool you will have.

Developing the Synopsis...

Start the synopsis with a clever hook. This is the theme, or a shocking one-line blurb or premise which completely encapsulates the tone of your work. It is a brief statement about your story, which is designed to capture the editor's interest instantly. It can also be used as a blurb for the book jacket.

Your **main character** is to be introduced by name. Your main character is the person who has the most to gain in your story, and the major portion of your story will be told from their viewpoint. Generally this introduction takes no more than one or two paragraphs. Make sure to establish the character's major goal s/he wishes to achieve.

From there, you will introduce **your second main character** and their particular viewpoint. This character will be at odds with the hero/heroine, or a protagonist to the other main character. This will be a facet of the character's personality, goals and interests.

In the next paragraphs, **state the complications, final crisis/black moment, change in attitude, and where the resolution of your story unfolds and finishes.**

To Begin:

Ask yourself these six questions you learned in your High School English class on how to write a story, be it long or short: **Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?** These same questions are viable in novel/synopsis writing also.

Who, Where, and When introduce the characters, and set the time period of the story. **What and Why show the development of each character's goals, motivations and growth and conflict.** How the hero/heroine get from point A to Z will be the meat of your story.

Once you are finished with your manuscript ...critique yourself...

1. Do you know which scenes or chapters in your novel show the internal and external conflict, and do you have enough scenes or chapters that show a resolution to those same conflicts? Don't wait until the very end of your story to wind everything up. Have your reader want to go back and reread your novel, to find out the subtle clues you left throughout your manuscript. This technique is what made great writers...great.

2. Have you successfully created the feeling that all conflicts have been resolved and resolved completely with no issues hanging to drive your reader crazy? Is the black moment descriptive enough to excite your reader and have their hearts' beating fast in anticipation?

3. Have you tied up any loose ends or unexplained events? Today's reader is sophisticated and well read and will catch you readily in any mistakes or inconsistencies. They will also write to tell you and your publisher about these mistakes, sometimes in great detail. Then, they will publish your name and book title on every website known to the Internet, and tell everyone what a clinker your book was/is.

On the other hand, I have had reviewers and editors who had a very narrow view of the world and what can be done, especially if you have a determined, headstrong heroine, which I did in my first book. Here is where you should be very well documented.

4. Are all the characters you've introduced explained and truly essential to your story, especially if you've assigned them a name? Do your characters have the personalities and inner dimension, a rich quality of thought and dialog needed to carry the story from beginning to end? Have you rounded out their personalities to make them live, not only in your book, but in the hearts' of your readers so that they wish or ask for more?

5. Have you edited yourself thoroughly to remove any non-essential data and dialog in an effort to tighten your story and keep it moving along? In the trade it is called 'tightening'. Nothing is more annoying to an editor or to a reader, than reading the same lines over and over again in different chapters. It may boost your word count, but you lose a potential sale on your next book, if you can sell it. Formula romances are notorious for this. I know it's done by many other

writers, but please, don't be one of those writers. It gives all of us a bad name and makes it that much harder to get into the market. If you are going to be a writer, be the best you can be.

6. Is your time frame, settings, and history, true to the period you are writing about? Is the language true to a fault to the settings and to the history your are trying to portray? Research, research, research.
7. If you've elected to use profanity, is it essential to the story? There can be a thin line between profanity essential to a story, and vulgarity. Keep only what you need to portray high emotions.
8. If you have written sexually explicit scenes, is the sexual scene essential to the story and for the line you are targeting? If you have only alluded to the sexual scenes, are they so well written, your reader will wish for more because of the sexual tension you've portrayed?
9. If you are writing inspirational stories, are your hero/heroine motivated, courageous people? Have you moved your reader with the hero/heroine's courage at the black moment, or have you filled your story with trite, stereotyped, presumptuous religious messages that will be a turn off to readers who might wish to read your book or perhaps avoid buying other books written by you?
10. If you are writing children or young adult stories, have you done your research as to your age groups' interest and understanding as well as maturation level? Does your young hero/heroine show maturity and courage at the black moment, or have you filled your story with youth stereotyped, presumptuous clichés and characters, which will turn off a young reader to any other stories you may write?

Remember...you are trying to garner readers with whatever style and story type you write in. Be courageous and realistic in evaluating your work.

Once all these questions are answered, and any others you can think of not mentioned here, which relate to your story and your specific genre, then start mapping out your synopsis in a rough draft form.

Some rules to remember...

1. Write your manuscript and your synopsis in the present tense, first person preferably.
2. Use specific, descriptive words to describe people, places and things. Don't shy away from descriptive adjectives and action adverbs like some poorly structured writing classes advise. These words carry the language and set the tone and the mood, as well as create the dynamics of your story. The use of adjectives and adverbs will not determine whether you are publishable or not. Bad writing, poor plot line, unbelievable characters, misspellings, poorly submitted, sloppy work will be your downfall, as well as listening to the wrong people giving advice about things they really know nothing about.

Keep in mind too, for many writers, once they sell a book, unfortunately they are asked to give a writing class for some odd reason. These folks are as green at this 'writing business' as you are, and most still don't have a clue as to what is going on. They are still learning their craft and should be in a classroom learning their craft, not teaching.

Your editor, however, will have a good writing background and/or a degree in English, and more than likely journalism experience. Your editor will be the best judge of your story. It's your editor and their suggestions, which will help you get your manuscript to publication.

3. Be mindful of the publishing line you plan to submit to. Use wording which displays your skill with descriptive imagery. [Those good old adjectives and adverbs again.] If you are writing a suspense story, use words, which will convey suspense to the reader.

4. Don't use the same words and phrases over and over again, especially in the same sentence. Use your Thesaurus habitually. Develop your writer's vocabulary to prevent each of your stories having the sameness.

5. If you are writing a love story, make it sizzle with sexual tension.

If you are writing children's stories, make them educational and interesting, and at the age level you have targeted for.

If you are writing a 'how to' book, make sure you have all your bases covered, and that you are well researched so it sounds as though you indeed, know 'how to'.

If you are writing non-fiction, definitely have your research data and your sources very well documented with the appropriate footnotes [as needed] and bibliography.

6. When you begin your synopsis, match the writing style of your synopsis to the writing voice of your story. Be humorous and exciting...not cute! Mention only the story line or emotions you want to convey in the synopsis, and be brief. Be careful not to repeat information or dwell upon a single emotion, and keep your dialog moving along. You won't have a second chance to make an impression.

7. Use dialogue taken from your manuscript sparingly if at all. Some clichés can slip by in your manuscript if they are essential to the story line, but not very many unless they are fully explained. This is a given with any genre and is religiously adhered to by an editor.

8. In your synopsis, mention secondary characters by inference, and by name only if vital to the plot. Do not assume the editor will understand what you mean. Your editor's interpretation of your words will be literal in every sense of the word, especially those words you've used in your synopsis.

9. Remember too, the plot of your story is not the conflict. Know which is which for your own clarity so you will be able to convey this to the editor in your synopsis.

10. Edit, cut, edit, cut, edit, and cut even more to keep your synopsis concise and to the point. Do this also with your manuscript.

11. Proofread, and then proofread again, and again. Make your work the best, most polished, error free it can be. There is a great deal of competition out there in the marketplace, and you don't want to end up in some editor's slush pile without any consideration whatsoever for all the work you've done. Writing is work; it is a profession. Be proud of yourself and your profession and your work.

NOTE: IF YOUR SPELL-CHECK FAILS TO FLAG A MISSPELLED WORD, you may have accidentally added it to your Custom Dictionary. To remove or add words, go to Tools\Options\Spelling & Grammar\Custom Dictionaries. Select the dictionary you wish to modify and click Modify to bring up a dialog box in which you can remove (or add) words.

When it is time to mail your synopsis:

1. Double-space your pages. Left justify your document only.
2. Use one [1] inch margins on all four sides of your document.
3. Turn off your hyphenation. If a word is naturally hyphenated, that is fine, but no breaking down further of a word from line to line.
4. Use a header with your name, title of the book, and page number, in that order.
5. Page number always goes in the upper right hand corner, to be set with the header and footer menu.
6. Use white, clean paper, and print on one side only.
7. Use a high quality printer, no dot matrix. If you use a typewriter, use an electric one for clean, sharp type. The days of a hand written manuscript are over.
8. Limit your synopsis to five pages or less, unless the publisher requests more pages. The more concise and brief you are in your synopsis, giving the most and best information about your story, the better.

Some editors will ask for a synopsis of three pages, some as much as 15 to 35. This doesn't mean you have to submit as many pages as asked for, but rather that your synopsis is sharp, concise, well-written, and impressionable. Your editor will appreciate the effort.

Note: It is good form to have a brief synopsis at the ready, as well as an expanded synopsis for those publishers/editors who request one or the other. Be prepared, so that you don't have to labor over it at an important moment.

9. Have a brief biography ready giving your credentials, previous writing work, awards, etc., no matter how old or out of date. [It's advisable to update monthly, or at least look it over.] Your bio is a chronological list of your writing achievements. Have also, a press kit for yourself in hard copy and as a Word Doc that can be emailed when requested.

10. To mail, do not bind your manuscript with rubber bands, paper clips, string or whatever. Do use a strong Tyvek envelope to mail your publisher/editor the requested documents. Manila envelopes can and do break during mailing, especially stuffed with a large manuscript. You want your requested documents to arrive complete, in good condition, absolutely without any pages missing.

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