

MASTERING THE SYNOPSIS by MARLO BERLINER

Happens all the time, you look up the agent of your dreams, and cringe when you see those dreaded words: Please send me X number of pages, *plus a synopsis*.

So, what the heck is a synopsis?

For absolute clarity, first let's talk about what it's *not*.

WHAT IT'S NOT

- It's not a query, or cover letter.
- It's not a book proposal.
- It's not a pitch.
- A synopsis doesn't give personal information about the author. (That goes in your query.)
- It does not include comp titles. (Again, that goes in your query.)
- And as much as possible, it does not include **back story, minor points, or minor characters**.

It helps to know what shouldn't go into the synopsis because most readers (agents, editors, or teachers) want the synopsis to fill only one to two single-spaced pages. Think of all the space you've just saved leaving out the above items.

At this point, it should be noted that agents and editors will typically give you the format they would like you to use with your synopsis – specifying page length, font size (as with your manuscript, Times New Roman 12 is usually best), spacing (the default is single-spaced unless they state otherwise), and at times, whether or not to include the ending. (99.999% want to see the resolution, but always check the agent or editor preferences. If they don't say not to include the ending, then **include** it. So, I want to stress again – the default is to **include the ending**.) What to do if they don't specify page length of the synopsis? Easy, make it 1 to 2 pages, and feel free to tell them Marlo told me to do this.

An important SUGGESTION to note before you even begin: Start by writing a longer synopsis than the length you need! (Think of it like trying out a new haircut; you can always cut more later if you find it too long.) For example, if an agent or editor has asked for a three-page synopsis, write four pages. Save that longer version for when someone asks you for a four-page synopsis. Then cut it down to the desired length of three pages. Need a two-page synopsis? Distill the three-page version down yet again to two pages. Save that version. Now you're asked for a one-page synopsis. Distill it down further to the one page. But at each step of the way, save and keep each version! Why? Because you will find that everyone asks you for a different length and you will need all of them!

So...then what IS a synopsis?

WHAT IT IS

A **synopsis** is a summary of your book that familiarizes the reader with the plot and character arc, and how they unfold. Essentially, it's a roadmap or skeleton of your story.

Your novel synopsis should achieve **two things**: firstly, it should convey the contents of your book, and secondly, it should be intriguing!

While you don't need to pull out *all* the marketing stops at this stage, you should have a brief hook at the beginning and a sense of urgency underlying the text that will keep your reader going. It should make potential agents/editors want to devour your whole manuscript — even though they'll already know what happens.

WHY SHOULD I LEARN HOW TO WRITE A SYNOPSIS?

First, a synopsis can be one of the most powerful tools in a writer's arsenal. Why? Because very often it is nearly impossible for writers to see the faults in their own story logic because they're too close to the story. Forcing you to write a synopsis, forces you to connect the dots of your plot, and if you're having trouble connecting them to summarize for your synopsis, then your plot holes and logic issues will more easily jump out at you.

As an author, a synopsis can be an essential step in making sure your story is solid. Writing a synopsis will help you look at your story at the top level—in other words, see the forest for the trees. Imagine you're an eagle, okay. If you're on the forest floor you can only see the trees and what's in front of you. When you fly over and look at the forest from the top level, you can then see the forest for the trees. You can see the landmarks, what stands out, points of interest, in other words, the roadmap. By writing the synopsis, you will be able to see if your road has a straight through-line, or wanders too much, or has too many tangents. You will be able to see if your story is going where it should.

Think of writing a synopsis as distilling your story down to its essential elements. The process of distilling your story down goes like this: you have your book — that's the largest funnel, then you distill it down into a medium size funnel — a one-to-two-page synopsis (which gives the ending), then into a smaller funnel — your one to two paragraph pitch (which excludes the ending but just tries to entice; this is what goes in your query and maybe eventually the back cover of your book), then you distill your story down further into your smallest funnel — your one to two line 'elevator' pitch (what you would say to an agent if you only had a few seconds with them in an elevator; also excludes the ending and just tries to entice). True story — highly regarded as the greatest elevator pitch ever was for the movie *Alien*. Ridley Scott sat in a room opposite execs and said, "It's *Jaws* in space." And the room lit up and they were off and running making a movie. Ridley had essentially distilled the story down to the smallest, but most effective concoction possible!

No discussion of synopsis would be complete without a short refresher on **PLOT**. Keep in mind, that plot is *not* simply a list of the events that happen in your novel. A plot is a series of *interconnected* events that unfold in your novel. Plot is not: this happened, then that happened. Plot is, **this happened, because that happened**.

Let me give you an example: I went to the pet store, I went to get groceries, and I went to the dry cleaners. Those events are episodic and *not a plot*. Those events are not interconnected or interdependent on one another. I could rearrange those events in any order, or take any of them out entirely, and it would not affect the plot of my day. Now compare that with this: I went to the pet store and ran over a nail in the parking lot which punctured my tire, so then I had to go to STS to get a new tire put on. While I was waiting at STS, I ran into an old friend and we decided to have dinner that night. I called my son and told him to pick up the dry cleaning for me before they closed. When the tire was finished, instead of going to get groceries, I went to the Mall to buy a new dress to wear for that evening's dinner. When I got home, I ordered takeout for my son, got dressed and went to dinner with my friend. Not a very exciting plot, but a plot nonetheless – each event happened only because of the last event, and the order of those events cannot be rearranged and make any sense.

Just a little aside – I learned the most about story structure from Michael Hauge. Michael is a script doctor in Hollywood and for the longest time he was on Will Smith's payroll. Will wouldn't make a movie without first having Michael read the script and give his input. For many years, Michael has given workshops on story structure to screenwriters, filmmakers, and novelists. You can find out more about his methods at storymastery.com. Be sure to grab a copy of his Six-Stage Plot Structure Chart.

HOW DOES AN AGENT OR EDITOR USE A SYNOPSIS? WHAT ARE THEY LOOKING FOR?

Your synopsis can play a big role in whether an agent wants to see more of your book or not. No matter how well-written your query letter, the bottom line is that this summary tells agents (and later publishers) what they really need to know: what your book is about, what makes it unique, and most importantly, if they can sell it.

An agent/editor looks for flaws in story logic, plot holes, and lapses in character agency (are events just happening to your character or do they have agency?) Agency is when your character is *making* things happen and/or doing things *proactively*. I look to see if your book wraps up all loose ends and comes to a satisfying conclusion. I look to see if the book can stand on its own, without sequels. (It's okay if it leaves a door open, but the major action in the first novel must come to a final conclusion). If I see any of these problems in your synopsis, I may decide *not* to request. That's why it's so vital that you make your synopsis airtight. (Hint: it'll be a lot easier to make your synopsis airtight, if your story is airtight.)

Think of it this way, if your book were a house, then your synopsis is its blueprint, and the agent or editor is the housing inspector, inspecting the joists, the framing, the foundation of your story, not the window dressing.

An agent/editor uses the synopsis to see if the book could sell or work for a specific imprint. We may love your writing, but to know for sure if the story has all the bells and whistles, we need an idea of the plot, even the spoilers.

Once the book is acquired an editor will use the synopsis (sometimes cutting and pasting) to explain to others why the house needs to buy this book, or as rationale for why the editor bought the book. Over and over, an editor will have to explain to many within their house what your book is about, and that's where your synopsis comes in.

- Five months later and closer to publication, after reading a hundred other books after yours (with hundreds of plots, settings, and characters), an editor may need to reread your synopsis to jog their memory so that they don't put the wrong characters on your cover or mess up the back cover copy.
- Also closer to publication, a talented copywriter may piece together a gem of a blurb using your synopsis.
- Overseas markets may become interested in your stories. To tantalize, say, Germany or Spain or France, editors give them snippets of information, some of which comes from your synopsis, which the editor will have to reread *again*.
- There's also that time when your editor will have to edit a book and they're not certain if it's the one they think it is (after all, you've written a dozen more books since). So your editor will read the synopsis *again*, for the umpteenth time.
- Ten years go by. Your editor might be assigned to conjure a list of twenty of your past books to reissue in four box sets, but they can't remember what happened in each of them. What do they whip out, *again*? Your synopsis for each of your books.

Another important reason you need to master writing a synopsis – when it comes time to sell your second book, you will most likely sell it on spec (short for speculation) – meaning, with a synopsis and three chapters. An editor will then have to sell that book to their team using your synopsis. So, by then you better be darn good at writing one!

Another important reason to learn how to write a synopsis – being able to distill your story down is an art and an absolutely necessary skill. You need to be able to distill your story down into a synopsis, then a one to two paragraph blurb to be used in your query, and then finally into a one-to-two-line elevator pitch or logline. All three of these will be used over and over again during the lifespan of your book. Many times, I start with the short blurb that my client originally sent me in their query to begin fashioning their pitch to an editor. Later, that same

pitch, or a very close facsimile, may find its way onto the back cover blurb of the book. Then, another iteration of that same blurb may find its way onto retail descriptions of the book, or on Netgalley or Edelweiss. In fact, it's not unheard of for the original blurb to travel all the way down through that process. So, knowing how to distill your story down is absolutely an essential skill to hone.

SO, HOW DO WE DO WRITE A SYNOPSIS?

First, like we said before, look to the guidelines of whoever is asking for the synopsis as to page length, font size, spacing. Second, the text will be written in **third person, present tense**, *regardless of the tense or POV of your actual book*. Writing a synopsis in first or second person doesn't really work because it's not meant to be *narrated* — just summarized. Basically, using present tense works to engage the reader while the third person allows the story to be told smoothly. Third, ***tell, don't show***.

Writing a novel synopsis in 4 steps:

1. Get the basics down first

When it comes to writing a synopsis, substance is the name of the game. No matter how nicely you dress it up, an agent or editor will reject any project that doesn't demonstrate a fully fleshed out plot and strong narrative arc. So it stands to reason that as you begin writing, you should focus on the fundamentals. One of the best ways to begin, especially when trying to write a synopsis for a lengthy novel, is by writing a short summary of what happens in each chapter. Allow yourself just a few sentences per chapter. Once you have that, then you proceed to pull out the following from your outline:

Start with major plot points

Naturally, you want agents to be aware of your story's MAJOR PLOT POINTS. So, the best way to start summarizing your story is to create a list of those plot points, including:

- The **inciting incident** — what sparks the central conflict of your story?
- The events of the **rising action** — what happens in the interlude between the inciting incident and the climax, and how does this build tension?
- The height of the action, or **climax**, of your story — this one is the most important, as it should be the most exciting part of your book!
- The **resolution** or ending — again, unlike a blurb, a synopsis doesn't need to dangle the carrot of an unknown ending to the reader; you can and *should* reveal your story's ending here, as this brings the plot and narrative arc to a close.

Listing these points effectively maps out the action and arc of your story, which will enable the reader to easily follow it from beginning to end.

Include character MOTIVATIONS

The key here is not to get too deep into characterization since you don't have much room to elaborate. Instead, simply *emphasize character motivations* at the beginning and end of your synopsis — first as justification for the inciting incident, then again to bring home the resolution. For example:

Beginning: “Mia has spent the past sixteen years wondering who her father is [motivation]. When a mysterious man offers her the chance to find him, she steals her mother’s credit card and buys a ticket to London to begin her journey [inciting action].”

Ending: “She finds her father and returns to the US [resolution], safe in the knowledge that she’ll never have to wonder about him again [restated motivation].”

Include character EMOTIONS

This again, is where you must TELL, not show; for the sake of economy of words. In general, when writing a synopsis, plot is more important than emotion. *However*, it’s important to have SOME EMOTION in your synopsis. The clever writer will marry the two and drop in the plot point together with the emotion.

Example: Driven by rage, Craig sets his brother’s car on fire.

Example: Crushed by her best friend’s betrayal, Juanita plots her revenge—a prank sure to embarrass her ex-BFF.

Example: Tyree wins the award and overjoyed, calls his estranged father to tell him.

2. Highlight what’s unique

Now it’s time to spice up your synopsis by highlighting the elements that make it unique. Agents need to know what’s so special about *your* book in particular — and moreover, is it special enough to get readers to pick it up? Below are some features you might employ to grab an agent’s attention and assure them of your book’s appeal.

Voice

Your *writing voice* is an essential tool here: it conveys your novel’s tone and is one of the most important factors in making your work stand out. However, it’s also one of the most difficult elements to evoke in such a small amount of space.

The best way to capture voice in a synopsis is through *extremely deliberate word choice and sentence structure*. So if you were Jane Austen, you'd use clever words to magnify your wit: **"When Darcy proposes to her apropos of nothing, Elizabeth has the quite understandable reaction of rejecting him."** You may not be able to use all the elaborate prose of your novel, but your synopsis can still reflect its overall feeling.

My suggestion: try to get a bit of your voice in the synopsis in just a few places. Not everywhere! In general, this is not the time for flowery language – you want 'economy of words'. Two or three sentences showing your voice will be enough.

Plot twists

Even though they're one of the oldest tricks in the book, readers will never tire of juicy plot twists. Plot twists come in many forms but are, generally speaking, any event that is unexpected. If your novel contains one or more of these twists, especially at the climax, make sure your synopsis accentuates it. But don't hint too much at the twist, as this will make it seem more dramatic when it comes; a couple of words in the intro will suffice as foreshadowing. For instance, if you were writing a summary of *Gone Girl*, you might open with "Nick Dunne wakes up one morning to find that his wife, Amy, **has apparently disappeared.**" This implies that she may not be as "gone" as we think she is, setting the stage for the later reveal.

Point of view

Another aspect that might set your book apart is a **distinctive point of view**. Since you'll be giving your synopsis in third person, you can limit this inclusion to an introductory sentence: "This book is narrated from the point of view of a mouse." This strategy works best for books with a highly unusual point of view (such as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, in which the story is told by Death.)

Avoid generalities that say nothing and detract from the uniqueness of your story.

Examples: This is a coming-of-age story. (So? What children's book isn't in some way a coming-of-age-story?)

Examples: Lauren learns to rely on and believe in herself. (Oh yeah, what's that look like exactly? That's fine to include but tell me the *tangible* thing that she does that *proves* this is what has happened in her character arc.)

3. Edit for clarity and excess

Don't shroud your synopsis in mystery; this is very frustrating to agents who just want to know *what happens in your book!* With that in mind, after you've written the bulk of your summary, it's time to edit for clarity. You also may have to delete some text, so you can get it right in that couple-page sweet spot.

Editing for clarity

Again, the paramount rule of synopses is a real doozy: **tell, don't show**. It's the opposite of what writers are always told, but it's absolutely essential for a successful synopsis. As you return to what you've written, scan for sentences that are vague or unclear, especially toward the beginning. Many writers fall into the trap of trying to hook agents by opening with a sentence akin to the first murky line of a literary novel. Again, though you do want your intro to be intriguing, it has to cut to the chase pretty quickly.

When it comes to opening a synopsis, you need to think like Tolkien, not Tolstoy. **"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."** Crisp, clear, and to the point: one of the very few times you should *tell, rather than show*.

Editing excess words

If your synopsis is longer than a couple of pages at this point, you need to make some serious cutbacks. Read through what you have, scrutinizing every sentence and word, even if you think you've chosen them carefully. Reduce any run-on sentences or subordinate clauses that unnecessarily lengthen your piece. Avoid saying essentially the same thing twice.

Example: Andrea doesn't have many friends. She's tired of being a loner.

Better: Andrea's tired of being a loner. (Loner already implies she doesn't have many friends.)

Finally, eliminate irrelevant details — anything that doesn't lead to the next plot point or directly contribute to your voice or other distinctive elements. It's unlikely you'll have included any of these in the first place, but just in case they've slipped through, **cut them**. Save the frills for your book; remember, your synopsis is all about *substance*.

4. Make sure it flows

By the time it's finished, your synopsis should read like a SparkNotes summary. This means not only clearly and concisely hitting every important point, but also reading in a smooth manner, placing just the right amount of emphasis on the critical moments and unique aspects we've discussed.

Get test readers

A great way to ensure that your synopsis is paced precisely and flows well is to give it to test readers, both writers and non-writers. You've spent way too much time with these words to be objective about them, so pay attention to what other people suggest: possible word substitutions, transitions, and which details to emphasize versus delete. Pay particular attention if they say they "don't understand" something, or that it's unclear how one event followed the next. Using a couple test readers who have NOT read your book will be helpful as well — they will be able to find the holes in your synopsis and/or be able to tell you if your book's synopsis is affective — does it sound interesting enough to make them want to read your book.

Use professional synopses as models

You don't want to look at examples of other synopses too soon, otherwise yours will come out sounding formulaic and stale. That said, professional synopses (like SparkNotes) can be a very valuable tool for refining toward the end of the process! Compare and contrast them to the synopsis you've written, and adapt any techniques or turns of phrase you feel would enhance it.

A synopsis is one of the most important tools in a writer's toolkit. If you can tell your story in short form, you really know your story. It's a different kind of writing, but valuable nonetheless.

EXTRA TIPS AND TRICKS

When your book is action-packed and there are too many events to get in a 1 to 2 page synopsis, you will need to GATHER EVENTS.

Example: With the help of several people in town Lucinda and her friends find a map, a box of old postcards, and a key. (These events probably take place over several scenes or even chapters, but here you've distilled it down to a list of what has happened.)

Next, you might also need to GATHER TIME.

Example: Several days go by and though she pursues several leads, Jessica is no closer to solving her mother's disappearance.

TIPS FOR PICTURE BOOK WRITERS WHO NEED TO WRITE A SYNOPSIS OR DISTILL DOWN YOUR STORY FOR AN AGENT OR EDITOR (since it's so different than writing a synopsis for a novel)

PBs – fiction: tell me more fluff about your story, What is the theme or message you're trying to get across with your story. What is the tone (example – whimsical).

PBs – non-fiction: say who/what your book is about, why it's timely (i.e. why will people be interested in it or want to read it now? example - it has a classic feeling or a universal theme), and why you're the person to write it (what is your expertise? have you aligned yourself with experts to write it?)

THUMB NAIL FOR WRITING A ONE-PAGE SYNOPSIS

A one-page synopsis should give the agent/editor a complete picture of what happens in your book. The synopsis focuses on the main character's emotional arc and the main plot points of the story.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind when writing a one-page synopsis:

- Start with the character that we are supposed to care the most about, and reveal her conflict or goal.
- By the end of the first paragraph in your synopsis, we should know your main character, his/her goal, the stakes to your character not achieving this goal, and the setting. Think of this as the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND WHY of your book.
- Next, reveal the major events. Do so while weaving in the emotional stakes and the ways that your main character's feelings change.
 - A synopsis can include feelings, not opinions. We don't care (at this point) how you, the writer, feel about your story; we want to read about the changing emotions of your main character(s).
- Lastly, tell both the final internal and external resolutions.

THUMB NAIL FOR WRITING A ONE-LINE PITCH (a.k.a. a log line)

Five Basic Elements distilled into one sentence (two at most!):

Who is your main character?

What is their inciting incident? (what has happened to them that has never happened before in their life)

What must they now do?

What are their obstacles, conflicts, or challenges?

What are the stakes, meaning – what happens if they fail?

Examples:

When Katniss Everdeen's little sister is chosen to represent District 12 in the Hunger Games, Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place and now must fight to the death to save both herself and her family.

When Sheriff Brody's coastal town is threatened on July 4th weekend by a massive shark, he must face his fear of the ocean to save the townspeople.