

### **A one-page synopsis, expandable on demand**

1. Write one sentence at the top of a sheet of page or the computer screen on what the novel is about. Good examples of these may be found in best-seller lists: “A young white woman and two black maids in 1960s Mississippi”; “22 years after a Dublin woman stood up her intended groom, her abandoned suitcase is discovered”; “two orphans become involved with a gang of street children (Ages 10 and up).”
  - a. 20 minutes: go!
  - b. Skip 2 line spaces.
  - c. Breathe. You just wrote your pitch line for your novel!

2. Write one sentence two spaces under #1 on the action scene that launches the story. Include the lead character’s ordinary world, time and place prior to the story’s beginning, the conflict the lead is thrust into, what puts lead into it. This is the who, what, when, where hurdled into the why--the story’s catalyst.
  - a. 20 minutes: go!

Beth Anderson: “You don’t want to say something like, Jack drives down the highway and notices the beautiful red and gold sunset off to the west. That’s not action. That’s not your beginning. Now, if Jack happens to hit someone with his car while he’s gazing at that sunset, and the results of that action are what your book is about, then you have a different situation. There’s a reason for the sunset. But in this case your first sentence should be something like, While driving on Highway 101 toward Los Angeles, Jack, while watching the sun set, hits and kills the new wife of a top west coast mobster.”

- b. Skip to bottom of screen or sheet of paper.

3. Just above the bottom of the screen or sheet of paper, write one sentence on the action scene that ends the story, where your lead character pulls off a save single handedly and triumphs, the scene where the conflict/s are resolved and all loose ends are tied up.
  - a. 20 minutes: go!

Beth Anderson: “No matter what happened during the book, may it be murder and mayhem, or sloughing through the Everglades to find out who Marsha’s real father was, there is a definite point where all their problems are solved. And it should be some action. That is your ending, not what happens afterward--John and Marsha sit on the swing on her grandmother’s back porch discussing their wonderful future together...”

4. Between #s 2 and 3 in the middle of the screen or sheet of paper, write 4-5 major action-scene points of what happens to your lead character between opening (#2) and ending (#3). You want a bare-bones main storyline. Omit description and secondary or minor characters. Cite major action scene by scene, roadblock by roadblock, to reveal the story’s development. Include

- the initial survival plan your lead(s) develops perhaps with allies that falls apart suddenly *and* how the lead scrambles to come up with an alternative;
- the Black Moment when all the odds are stacked against your protagonist and it seems impossible to triumph;
- the Point of No Return, so severe that the protagonist has no choice but to face the challenger(s) once and for all head on;
- Climax—Every action scene with protagonist leads up to this key event where the main characters' knots become unraveled (story's dénouement).
- Name only main character(s). Flesh out leads with tags or characteristics that affect the character emotionally, in terms of action/reaction (e.g., personality, occupation, nationality or origin, age, gender, race, class).
- External conflict that advances the plot only. Internal conflict that conveys leads' emotions, action/reaction only. Dialogue, only if it enhances the synopsis.

This synopsis middle will let you see whether the lead's problems develop logically from the initial problem (#2) to its resolution (#3). All questions are raised and are answered. The synopsis reader (agent, editor, producer) learns that you can carry off plotting successfully.

### Synopsis Format

Present tense, active voice

Double spaced, 1-inch margins all around, paginated, and printed out in 12-pt. font

Each page includes a header with fiction category, genre/subgenre, title and author, word count of completed Ms., synopsis, "p. 1 of X"

Presentation, grammar, punctuation, spelling, writing technique, and skill are *all equally important* for a successful synopsis.

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There. You have a one-page synopsis of your novel, however many words the completed manuscript totals. This is your novel's base synopsis, expandable as required by agents, contents, publishers. Name the file "OnePageSynopsis.xxx".

Use "SaveAs" on "OnePageSynopsis.xxx" document to rename it "3PageSynopsis.xxx" to avoid losing text of OnePageSynopsis.xxx.

Beth Anderson: [On "3PageSynopsis.xxx"] "...start adding in a little more about the action you already have, if you have room, and more action points. More roadblocks. Only things that are really necessary, given this three page limit. Leave out all descriptive phrases. "You'll find, if you have enough action points and roadblock points, that you won't really have

room for the window dressing details. You might have room to drop in a bit about your secondary characters, but leave them out until you're sure you have enough room in these three pages to develop them and their interaction with the leads all through the book. Stop at three pages, and save it. Keep that [document titled "3PageSynopsis.xxx"] open and [use SaveAs to rename it "6PageSynopsis.xxx"].... Now you're prepared with a three page synopsis and a one page one. Cool, right? And you're getting ready to expand it into six pages, aren't you?

"You're doing this [synopsis writing] completely backwards from any way you've ever thought about before, and it's working. That's because you're doing it logically, from the inside out. You can do this any number of times, always remembering to save at one, three, six, eight, ten, twelve pages, however many you want, never changing the initial details that were on each [shorter version], because every time you embellish these pages into a larger synopsis, you want all of the prior details to remain the same on all [your synopsis documents]. That way, your synopses will all say the same thing and be the same story, except that there will be more in the longer synopses [versions]."

#### Questions to ask a feedback reader about your synopsis

Are the protagonist's conflicts (internal and external) clearly defined?

Is the conflict strong and sustained through the synopsis?

Does the lead develop and grow emotionally throughout the synopsis?

Is there a compelling emotional connection in the synopsis between the main characters?

Is the synopsis free of details, easy to read and understand?

Does the synopsis read smoothly?

Does the synopsis sustain emotional tension throughout?

Does characterisation work in the synopsis? Do the characters spark your interest?

Is the writing well paced?

What writing technique(s) works well?

Does the synopsis have a memorable style or voice?

Do you want to read the whole novel? Why or why not?

#### Example of a wonderfully engaging synopsis

*Romeo and Juliet*, a play in 5 acts by William Shakespeare:

"Prologue:

Two households, both alike in dignity,

In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,

From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,

Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

ANITA D. McCLELLAN ASSOCIATES  
Book Doctor ~ Developmental Editor  
464 Common St., Suite 142  
Belmont, MA 02478  
(617) 575-9203; fax (206) 203-0829  
<http://www.anitamcclellan.com>; [adm@anitamcclellan.com](mailto:adm@anitamcclellan.com)

Synopsis Writing for Your Novel

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From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;  
Whole misadventured piteous overthrows  
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.  
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,  
And the continuance of their parents' rage,  
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,  
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;  
The which if you with patient ears attend,  
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.”

For detailed instructions on synopsis writing, see *Writing the Fiction Synopsis: a Step by Step Approach* by Pam McCutcheon (Memphis, TN: Gryphon Books for Writers, 1998; <http://www.gryphonbooksforwriters.com/>) and Beth Anderson's "Writing the Tight Synopsis" <http://www.bethanderson-hotclue.com/workshops/writing-the-tight-synopsis/>