

For the Synopsis-Writing Challenged

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From his website "Where the Map Ends":
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We should be nice to our brothers and sisters with this particular "challenge." You know, the ones who can write speculative fiction like nobody's business but couldn't write a 1-page synopsis to save their life.

You'd be surprised at how many of your peers, published and unpublished, can't write a decent synopsis of their own novels. I once saw a 55-page "synopsis" that was essentially the whole book in abbreviated form. And when I first read the proposal for a fantasy I ended up publishing, the synopsis was so terrible I almost rejected the book without even looking at the sample chapters.

If you see yourself in this description, fear not! For writers just like you I have compiled four methods of synopsis writing that have yet to fail.

Read on, brave soul, and learn this valuable tool for the professional writer. And maybe people won't break into peals of laughter (or tears) when they read your next synopsis.

Preamble

The first thing you need to understand is what a synopsis is not. A synopsis is not a **summary**. Nor is it **marketing copy**.

A **summary** is when you endeavor to tell pretty much the whole story, just shorter. That's how you can end up with 8 or 21 or even 55-page "synopses." Trying to include too much juicy detail about your story and be sure every cool thing gets mentioned is a good recipe for cooking a summary. It's a lousy way to create a synopsis.

Marketing copy is that teaser text you see on the backs of novels. "Will Jimmy defuse the bomb in time and save his beloved Winifred from the clutches of the evil wizard Zool?" You can include some snappy copy in your synopsis but don't let it be too much of a tease and *always include a description of how your story ends*.

Your goal is to create a document of no more than 1-2 pages (single-spaced) that accurately tells the high points of your story, including how it resolves, in a way that will be appealing to an acquisitions editor.

Note that "including how it resolves" bit. A synopsis for a proposal is something that is designed to help you sell your book to a publisher. **You must give away the ending.**

The agent or acquisitions editor does not want marketing copy: "*Will* she be able to destroy the monster? *Does* he have what it takes to consume alien brains?" Puke. In a proposal, give the steak, not the sizzle.

Leaving the synopsis incomplete is like going to a bank with a business plan and asking for a loan. When they ask you how you intend to get their money back, you say, "By, you know, doing stuff. Really good stuff. Trust me." Think you'll get your loan? Exactly. Same with a synopsis in a proposal: tell everything the prospective buyer needs to know.

Here are four methods for how to do this. I personally think #3 is the best, but it helps if you've read the previous two first. But any of them may help you, or some combination of them.

Good luck.

Method 1: Sixty Seconds and the Bus Will Be Here

This method, which has also been called "the elevator pitch," is a good one to try first.

Let's say you've stumbled upon a Hollywood producer who has heard the briefest premise of your story and is crazy to hear more about the novel. If he likes what he hears, he's going to turn it into a mega-budget movie. The problem is that he's getting on a bus for Idaho and you're not.

The bus has just pulled into the station. You have 60 seconds to tell him the whole story, including the ending.

Go.

This will make you hit only the high points and leave out the rest.

Try it.

Method 2: The 3-Act Structure

The filmmaking metaphor is useful when talking about fiction. Most screenwriters speak in terms of Act I, Act II, and Act III. Screenwriting books use this convention. It's helpful for novelists, too. And, when you understand what your three (or five, see below) acts are, you can talk about each one in brief paragraphs, which, when strung together, makes a tidy little synopsis.

- Act 1: Everything up to the point where the hero decides to really commit to the problem
- Act 2: Everything from there to the point when the thing happens that initiates the story's climactic series of events
- Act 3: Everything from there to the end (i.e., Act 3 contains the climax and the dénouement)

The thing to remember is that you're looking for a single watershed event that marks the end of one act and the beginning of another. To me, the transition from Act 1 to Act 2 in almost all stories is the moment when all the lead-up and setup is complete and the hero makes the decision to well and truly engage the issue. It's the "enough is enough" moment.

Let's use the movie *Alien* for discussion. In my opinion, Act 1 would end when the alien bursts out of Cain's chest, hisses, and slithers away. Now the main story really begins: the struggle of the alien against the crew. The crew begins taking action to hunt the thing down and kill it, which is the content of Act 2. Whatever moment that transition happened—going from wondering what's going on, to trying to kill the thing and survive—is the transition from Act 1 to Act 2, in my book.

The transition from Act 2 to Act 3 is usually clearer. Act 2, the main story, has been going on and both sides have scored points. But everything is moving toward the climactic showdown, the climax of the story. There comes a moment in Act 2 when all the pieces are in place for the final confrontation. When that moment comes, you've transitioned from Act 2 to Act 3.

In *Alien*, Act 3 begins when the alien has killed all the crew except Ripley. It's down to the two of them. The moment of truth is at hand. Ripley is our viewpoint character, our surrogate, so it's really down to that thing and *us*. The moment the last crew member dies is the moment everything is set up for this last confrontation. That's the transition from Act 2 to Act 3.

To recap:

- Act 1 is prologue to “the main story,” which is Act 2. The transition between the two is when the hero engages this main issue (or it engages him). Act 1 may take up a lot of time in the story, or it may not. In my novels Act 1 typically takes up the first half of the book.
- Act 2 is the main story, the juicy parts, and is everything up until the final confrontation is set up and ready to play out.
- That confrontation and the rest of the story is Act 3.

In a sense, Act 1 is setup for Act 2, the main story, and Act 2 is setup for Act 3, the huge confrontation everything has been rushing toward from the first page. (Method 3 below takes this very structure but comes at it from the opposite direction.)

In my novel *Operation: Firebrand—Crusade* the Firebrand team has been sent to Sudan to retrieve some villagers who have been abducted and sold into slavery. Act 1 is everything up to the moment when the team realizes the situation is much worse than they'd thought. They have a conscience-check moment when they decide they can't just leave. They decide to stay and really hurt these slavers. That decision marks the transition from Act 1 to Act 2.

Act 2 is the "crusade" of the title. It's why I wrote the book. Everything before was just the setup for this crusade. It's the heart of the story. We're in Act 2 right up until the moment when the Firebrand team is betrayed and used as bait for the enemy force. This last battle (fight for survival, for them) is the final confrontation of the story; it is the climax. That segment of the story, plus the resolution and dénouement, is Act 3.

Perhaps the 3-act structure is too confining for you or doesn't result in a full-enough synopsis. In that case you might play around with a proposed 5-part structure I've come up with.

- [Optional] The book's prologue, if it contains one
- Part 1: Establishing the characters and initial conflicts

- The turning point between Part 1 and Part 2 is when the unexpected complication smashes into the hero's world and breaks him out of his complacency
- Part 2: Initial efforts to deal with the problem or reach the goal
 - The turning point between Part 2 and Part 3 is when the hero realizes the problem is more severe than s/he'd thought at first
- Part 3: The heart of the story. The hero finds his or her stride and makes great progress against the problem or antagonist
 - The turning point between Part 3 and Part 4 is when the hero's good progress finally hits a monumental roadblock—disaster strikes
 - Secondly, Part 3 is over when everything necessary for the climax to happen is in place
- Part 4: The climax or climactic confrontation of the story
- Part 5: Dénouement and tying up any loose ends of the story
- [Optional] Epilogue, if any

Example: *Star Wars: Episode IV* in 5 Parts

- Prologue: scrolling text
- Part 1: Everything up to the moment Luke's aunt and uncle are killed
- Part 2: Everything from there to the point when the assault on the prison block on the Death Star goes wrong
- Part 3: Everything from there to the point when they're on Yavin hearing the briefing for the attack on the Death Star
- Part 4: The attack on the Death Star
- Part 5: The medal ceremony

Was that helpful, or just more confusing? Well, never fear! Method 3 is here.

Method 3: The 3-Act Structure in Reverse

This one may be the most helpful of the bunch, but is most easily comprehensible if read after the previous two methods. This one takes the climax of the story, the apex of Act 3, as the starting point, and works backward from there. It assumes that the final confrontation is really what the story had been headed to all along.

It's like on MaqQuest when you give a destination and then ask for directions to that place from an origin. Once you know where you're going and where you are, how you get there becomes clear.

Consider the moment of truth you want for your story. What is it? What's the ultimate climactic moment? Is it the hero facing the villain on a collapsing undersea base? Is it a choice between sacrifice and safety? What is the ultimate moment?

Then, when you have that penultimate moment firmly in mind, ask yourself what things need to happen immediately before this to get it set up. Well, all the characters have to get to the base somehow and it has to start collapsing somehow. The stakes have to have been made clear. Work backward until you see the point where all the elements are in place that lead directly to the climax. That point is the beginning of Act 3.

Then work backward from there. What is the “heart” of your story? What is that great middle section, the real reason you wanted to write this story? Where does this sweet spot begin? It ends, of course, when everything is in place to head toward the climax, which is Act 3. Work backwards to the beginning of Act 2 by looking for the spot when all the introductory stuff has been completed and the *real story* has begun.

And Act 1 is everything before that. Act 1 is all the introduction and setup that needs to be put in place so that Act 2 can begin.

When you know these things you can write paragraphs about each of your acts and arrange them into your synopsis.

Method 4: The Multi-Threaded Story

A writer friend of mine was having difficulty coming up with a synopsis for his story, mainly because it was so complex. I suggested he give one-paragraph summaries of each of his story lines. This helped him get it whittled down, and perhaps it will help you, too.

Here is the framework for the synopsis he came up with.

- Paragraph 1: Basic stage-setting for the whole story
- Paragraph 2: One regular-length sentence on each of these: the beginning, middle, and end of the main *action* story line
- Paragraph 3: One regular-length sentence on each of these: the beginning, middle, and end of the main *romantic* story line
- Paragraph 4: One regular-length sentence on each of these: the beginning, middle, and end of the main *spiritual warfare* story line
- Paragraph 5: The resolution and dénouement of the whole story

It worked nicely for him. Perhaps it will help you, as well.

You're On Your Own Now

I hope one of these methods, or some combination of them, has helped you craft a winning synopsis for your story.