

workshop #3 Writing a synopsis

Introduction

The synopsis of a novel is a summary of the main characters, motivations and actions in the order in which they appear in the book.

Along with your pitch letter (see workshop #2) and the first three chapters of your book, it is a document every agent, editor and grant-awarding body will expect to see as part of your submission (see Submitting Your Novel on the Get Published area of the website).

What agents and editors normally do when they receive a submission is read the pitch letter, read the first three chapters, then turn to the synopsis.

- the pitch letter is to pique their interest, tell them the story, the genre and the main selling points of the book and a bit about the author
- the first three chapters are to show you can write, create character and atmosphere, and hook your reader into your plot
- the synopsis shows how you develop the story into a satisfying plot

This is the context in which your synopsis will be read. The purpose of your synopsis is to:

- explain the structure of the novel
- reassure the agent or editor that the rest of the book is in safe hands

Later, once your book has been accepted for publication, the synopsis may be used to create the jacket blurb and sent to the art department to inspire a cover illustration. It is also vital if you are making a grant application.

When should you write it?

You decide...

- Helen Dunmore always starts her novels with a short synopsis then adapts it as she goes along. She keeps it brief, not too much detail, because she likes to 'surprise' herself, as she puts it. If a surprise results in a change of direction, she revisits her synopsis and either rewrites it or rejects the surprise.

• Cathy Kelly's synopses are working documents that she discusses with her agent and editor before embarking on the novel. She then incorporates their comments into the synopsis. As a multi-million-selling writer of commercial women's fiction, she requires their professional input.

• Minette Walters works without a synopsis, without plot structure, without any idea of how her thrillers are going to end. As an established author with a towering reputation, no-one would dare ask her for a synopsis. But if she did write one, it would have to be after the book was finished.

Basic layout

There are no set rules for presenting a synopsis, but if you follow these guidelines you should produce a synopsis that is easy to read and looks professional.

Length

- 500-1,500 words

Format

- header (your name, the title of your book, synopsis), e.g. EMMA BRACKSTONE/ HERRING GIRL/ SYNOPSIS
- footer (page number)
- front page (your contact details, including email, mobile and land line numbers, title of the book, SYNOPSIS in big letters)
- wide margins (2.5cm all round)
- double- or 1.5-spaced
- not justified
- 12-point character size (any bigger and you will seem unintelligent – trust me! – any smaller and you will appear obsessional and nit-picking)

Typeface

- choose a serif font (one with twiddly bits, like Times New Roman) for a classic easy-to-read text – this is why newspapers use serif fonts
- choose a sans serif font (very plain, like Arial) if you want to appear risky and modern – but remember you will be sacrificing readability to

some extent

- DON'T use a fancy font of any kind, ever

Style

- don't write it in the same style as your novel; it's not your novel; it's a plan of your novel; it needs to read like the summary of a novel in a book review, as follows:

- in the present tense
- in third person
- from an omniscient point of view
- unembellished

Structure

- don't divide the synopsis into chapters
- do reflect the structure of the book, e.g. include flashbacks where they occur in the plot, not where they would occur in real time
- tell the WHOLE STORY, including the denouement (the people reading your synopsis are professionals, not punters, and they need to know how it ends)
- refer to each character by name and be consistent, i.e. don't refer to Dr Eileen Gibson as Eileen, Dr Gibson, the doctor, Ellie; choose one and use it throughout the synopsis
- capitalise each character's first appearance in the synopsis, e.g. EILEEN, to signal that you are introducing a new character, then revert to lower case Eileen for future appearances
- signal from whose point of view you are writing with the acronym POV in brackets after the character's name, e.g. EILEEN (POV)
- if you switch POV, signal this in the same way

What's in the synopsis?

- the summary paragraph
- a character profile for each of your main characters
- the sequence of actions and scenes that make up the plot

There are several different ways of putting these three elements together. Ideally you start with your summary paragraph, then begin working through the plot, inserting a fresh character profile every time you introduce another main character. Some people find it easier to list the main character profiles after the summary paragraph and then launch into the plot.

The exercises that follow will guide you through each of these three main elements.

EXERCISE 1

A fairytale elevator pitch

We are going to start with the all-important summary paragraph, also known as the problem hook, the dramatic premise, or the 'elevator pitch'. It answers the question, 'What is this book about?'

Imagine you find yourself in an elevator with Stephen Spielberg. He is getting out on the next floor. You have just ten seconds to persuade him that your book should be the subject of his next movie.

An elevator pitch is a 25-word description of a book or script. It doesn't tell the whole story. It gives just enough information to get someone interested. To do this it describes the main character's main problem in the book.

Here's a 25-word summary paragraph for the fairytale *Cinderella*:

Cinderella is a beautiful ill-treated girl whose jealous ugly sisters try to prevent her from attending a ball where the Prince will choose a wife.

Notice that it includes a brief description of the main character, Cinderella, her main quest, to go to the ball, and her main obstacle, the ugly sisters. What it doesn't do is tell you what happened in the end. It sets up the dilemma but not the outcome. It baits the hook, but doesn't reel in the fish.

Now you try. Give yourself two minutes to write a 25-word elevator pitch for one of the following:

- *Sleeping Beauty*
- *Pride and Prejudice*
- a famous novel or film of your choice

For my elevator pitch for *Sleeping Beauty*, go to the end of this workshop.

EXERCISE 2

A summary paragraph for your book

Now try to write an 25-word summary paragraph

for your own novel. Try to include the following:

- your main character
- his or her main quest or challenge (if relevant)
- his or her main obstacle (if relevant)
- the main setting (if relevant)

Here is the summary paragraph of my novel, *Hungry Ghosts* (Penguin):

Sylvia is a depressed infertile woman who becomes obsessed with the disturbed and secretive young builder she hires to renovate her derelict cottage in Crete.

EXERCISE 3

The character profile

The profile is a digest of a character's defining characteristics and their back story. Start with your main character; if you have more than one main character, choose someone who propels the story forwards.

Defining characteristics

Now jot down the following information:

- his or her name
- his or her occupation and socioeconomic situation (e.g. penniless street musician, wealthy art collector, working-class athlete)
- some unusual or distinctive aspects of their appearance (e.g. psoriasis, flame-red hair, beer belly)
- some unusual or distinctive aspects of their personality (e.g. scatter-brained, studious, anorexic)

Back story

Next, provide your character with a 'back-story'. Make brief notes for yourself about the events that happened to your character before the book opens. Jot down everything that explains your character's attitudes and motivation. How did this character come to be in this situation? Has she been divorced or has her child died recently? Has he had a sudden illness or started a new job? Has she inherited or lost a fortune?

Reread both sets of notes and combine them into

a 50-word paragraph that introduces your main character and explains their back story. Here is an example from my novel:

Sylvia is a hospital pathologist who needs things to be under control. Her home is decorated in black and white, she always wears black and white. But she can't control her fertility – and after two failed IVF attempts and two miscarriages, she's on the edge of a nervous breakdown.

Simple! Now repeat this for all of your main characters – up to a maximum of six.

The story arc

People who write for stage and screen know that a good story normally follow an arc that takes the following general shape:

- plot point one: Also known as the 'tipping point' or 'inciting incident', this is the event that sets the story going. Your main character is trundling along and then something happens that changes everything – s/he break a leg, s/he encounters an old school friend, an evil fairy gate-crashes her christening party...
- plot point two: The story is unfolding when something else happens that changes the direction of the story and/or ratchets up the tension – the immobilized person with the broken leg witnesses a murder, the school friend is revealed to be a bigamist, a scratch by the bobbin of a spinning wheel puts someone into an enchanted sleep...
- climax: Events are moving faster. People are confronting each other, or in mortal danger; long-concealed secrets are revealed at last. This is the point where the metaphorical gun is pointed at your main character's head, the noose is tightening, the door to the locked room is kicked open.
- resolution: The point where mysteries are explained, characters forgive one another, or are arrested, or flee the country, or live happily ever after.

Many novelists use this arc shape to plan their novels. For actress Meera Syal, it's second nature. Booker prize-winner Pat Barker actually sketches a mountain range, with plot point one on a lower peak, plot point two on a loftier one, and so on. She

then superimposes her subplots so that their lesser peaks fall between the peaks of her main story. In this next exercise you will be doing this with your own story.

EXERCISE 4

The 10-point plot

Take a clean piece of A4 paper and write the numbers one to ten down the left hand side, spacing them to take up the length of the page. Now list the ten main events in your book in the order in which they occur. Most of these events should be actions, but some might be realisations or flashbacks that operate as revelations. Make sure your ten events take you from the beginning of the book all the way to the end. Give yourself five minutes to do this.

Finished? Now consider your list and try to identify the four elements of the story arc. Where is plot point one? Can you find the climax to the story?

Plot point one should be the first item on your list. If it isn't, you need to reconsider your plot. The most common mistake first-time novelists make is to start their books too early in the action (see workshop #4).

EXERCISE 5

Write to the tipping point

What I want you to do now is write a paragraph of 50 words that takes your main character from where they are in your character profile, through to your tipping point. Give yourself five minutes.

Here is an example, from the synopsis of *Hungry Ghosts*.

Attempting to cure her infertility, Sylvia is behaving more and more bizarrely: swimming in the winter sea, checking food labels, panicking about pollution. Fearing for her sanity, her husband BENNET takes her to Crete, where she becomes captivated by the island's simple purity and decides to buy a house there.

Finish your synopsis

You should now have a summary paragraph, a profile of your main character, a ten-point plot outline of your book, and a segment of your plot that takes your story up to the tipping point.

All you have to do now is write a paragraph for each of your nine other plot points. I know, I know, that leaves out so much! True. But it includes the most important things, doesn't it? And it's 500 words before you've added the other elements of the synopsis – so, really, there's no room for anything else.

Once you've reached the end of your plot, it's time to insert your summary paragraph at the beginning and intersperse your character profiles as they occur in the story. Voila! The first draft of your synopsis. Of course it will need its corners knocked off and a final polish, but if you've followed my instructions all the elements should now be in place.

8 handy hints

- avoid abstract words (e.g. struggle, understanding, resolution)
- use adverbs and adjectives sparingly
- read TV listings and book reviews for style and thumbnail character descriptions (e.g. 'Sylvia is an obsessive, infertile lab worker'; 'Martin is a secretive, itinerant carpenter')
- don't try to impress – write as if for a friend
- explain the story to a friend, encourage them to ask questions, record the conversation
- practise with other novels
- test-drive your synopsis with people who haven't read the book, and use their feedback for your rewrite
- swap manuscripts with a friend and write each others' synopses...

Elevator pitch for *Sleeping Beauty*

Princess Aurora is cursed by a jealous fairy and falls into an enchanted sleep from which she can only be woken by a lover's kiss.

Mslexia Roadshow workshops are devised and written by Debbie Taylor.