

## Writing a movie synopsis

*Knowing how to write a movie synopsis is an absolute must for anyone trying to shop a screenplay or work within Hollywood. But how can you compress the complex thoughts of your story into a one-page doc?*

At some point or another, we all have told a story to a friend. If we're tight on time, we've given them the highlights — just the big emotional punches and payoffs. And if we told it well, we get the reaction we wanted. That story would be a synopsis, and when you work in Hollywood, you have to master that art. Being able to provide a synopsis is an excellent and essential skill to have across the board in this town.

Today we'll learn how to write a synopsis, look at an example, go through a screenplay synopsis checklist, and get our film synopsis skills going.

So let's go!



### What is a movie synopsis?

This is a summary of the plot and story of your screenplay. It covers all **three acts** and all the relevant emotional beats to go along with the **character arcs**.

Use these acts to complete your screenplay synopsis

### How long is a movie synopsis?

A synopsis is usually one to three pages long, depending on what you're using it to do within the industry.

### What belongs in your screenplay synopsis?

When you're writing a synopsis, you want to cover each act and story beat that matters. I like to think of a screenplay synopsis as an extended trailer with an ending. You want to build the best version of the story that covers the beats that matter in the world makes this work viable in the marketplace.

### So what should be in your synopsis?

#### Movie/TV synopsis checklist:

- Limit your synopsis to one to three pages
- Define each act and what moment marks each act break
- Give us the world of the story and how each character arcs
- Include the most critical conflict or events in the story.
- Each paragraph needs to flow into the next, like a coherent story
- Include a sentence or two about your ending and how you leave the characters
- Let the tone of the screenplay come across in the way you write
- Proofread your synopsis for style, grammar, and usage.

### Who uses a screenplay synopsis?

Your screenplay synopsis is a great tool to master for your first job as a **Hollywood assistant**, mainly because you'll spend most of your nights and weekends **writing coverage** for your boss. If you're working on a **film treatment** or an outline, you want a synopsis to be able to communicate your story and its beats to an audience. Also, as a writer, sometimes I send a one-page synopsis to producers to get them excited about reading my full draft or to help them sell it in the international market at a festival like Berlin or Cannes.

People use these all over the industry. On your first day as an intern, you might be asked to write four or five of them. So get good at it quickly!

## Movie synopsis example

If you want to read an example, look at this one provided by [Script Mag](#). It takes the story of A Few Good Men and boils it down to all the relevant details. This one is written as it belongs in a screenplay coverage. It highlights the characters, world, stakes, and ties everything up neatly in the end.

### A FEW GOOD MEN

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A plea-bargaining Navy lawyer risks both career and prison if he exposes the commanding officer who ordered the hazing of a screw-up Marine his two clients are accused of murdering.

Lieutenant JG Daniel "Danny" Kaffee, an inexperienced U.S. Navy lawyer, leads the defense in the court-martial of two Marines, Lance Corporal Dawson, and PFC Downey. Both accused of murdering a fellow Marine, PFC William Santiago, at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, which is under the command of Colonel Nathan R. Jessup.

Santiago is a screw-up. He goes outside the chain to bargain for a transfer in exchange for blowing the whistle on Dawson for firing an illegal shot towards Cuba. Santiago's commanding officer, Lt. Jonathan Kendrick asserts to both Jessup and Jessup's executive officer, Lt. Colonel Matthew Andrew Markinson that he can handle Santiago.

When Dawson and Downey are arrested for Santiago's murder, Naval investigator and lawyer Lieutenant Commander Joanne Galloway suspects they were carrying out a "code red," a euphemism for extrajudicial punishment. She requests to defend them but command turns the case over to Kaffee.

Kaffee meets the defendants and finds them to be a little too gung-ho. He tries to both plea-bargain the case, then step down as lead counsel, realizing he was assigned this case due to his reputation for plea-bargaining, indicating someone high up didn't want the case to go to trial and because of that revelation, he proceeds to trial. During trial, it's established code reds are standard at Gitmo, as a means of getting screw-ups to get it together.

Eventually Galloway convinces Kaffee to call Jessup as a witness at great risk to his career. After questioning Jessup about his travel habits and comparing those to Santiago's, he accuses Jessup of ordering a code red on Santiago. Both prosecution and the judge object, but Jessup is caught in a lie. He stated Santiago was to be transferred off base for his safety in case other Marines sought retribution, but also stated Marines are honorable and always follow orders. Kaffee argues if other Marines were ordered to leave Santiago alone and always follow orders, Santiago would have been in no danger and thus, Jessup's argument that Santiago was to be transferred was a lie. Under pressure from Kaffee, Jessup furiously declares "You can't handle the truth!" and dismisses Kaffee as disrespectful of a Marine doing his duty, at which point he admits to ordering the code red. As Jessup angrily justifies his actions on the basis of national security, Ross arrests him, and the defendants are found not guilty of murder.

Regardless, the two Marines are dishonorably discharged for causing Santiago's death through their "conduct unbecoming a United States Marine." Downey does not understand why they are given dishonorable discharges, but Dawson accepts the verdict, and explains to Downey they failed to stand up for those too weak to stand up for themselves. As the two prepare to leave, Kaffee tells Dawson he doesn't need a patch on his arm to have honor. Dawson, who had previously been reluctant to respect Kaffee as an officer, barks "There's an officer on deck!" and salutes Kaffee.