

How to Write a Synopsis (1190 words)

Catherine Bakewell

Hi everyone!

On Writing Twitter, I often see people bemoan the DREADED SYNOPSIS. Hopefully the tips I have for you today can help you finish writing your synopsis without fear!

Note: this is for writing a synopsis *after* you've written at least one draft of your book. If you're writing a synopsis just based on a pitch, that's a whole other animal, and one I can tackle with you some other time!

BACK TO BUSINESS!

Step one: Decide on the length of your synopsis.

Agents will usually ask for one page single-spaced OR two pages double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font. Some agents or agencies will let you get away with longer synopses. Some agencies won't ask for a synopsis at all! But for a rule of thumb, have a one-page synopsis on hand. You may find that writing it out is a good exercise!

Step two: Make chapter summaries.

Go through every chapter of your book and write a 1-3 sentence summary for each chapter. Try to keep it simple. **Write the summaries in present tense.** Use past tense to refer to events that happens prior to the beginning of the book. For example, "After Voldemort killed his parents and gave Harry a scar, the boy is left at the doorstep of his mean aunt and uncle. Harry grows up thinking he is an ordinary kid."

Instead of: "Marie and Joseph discuss their feelings for macaroni and the way their mothers used to make it from scratch. They realize they have so much in common and they also discover that they grew up in the same home town. After hours of passionate discussion and a burning gaze, they argue passionately about whether or not they should be together."

Turn it into: "Marie and Joseph bond and decide to start dating."

Step three: Squish your chapter summaries together.

This one's easy. Take your isolated 1-3 sentence chapter summaries and put them together. Make them into cohesive paragraphs.

Step four: Cut unnecessary details and names

For unnecessary details, follow my macaroni example above. Cutting adjectives and descriptions will help you get your word count down. Read a long sentence of yours and figure out a way to summarize that one sentence. The meat of the sentence "On their way to buying more macaroni, Marie and Joseph go to Bryant Park and run into their old friend, Jessica, who is glowing with radioactive powers like they are" is really the idea that "Marie and Joseph learn they aren't the only ones with superpowers."

In my opinion, if possible, keep proper nouns and names to a minimum. Try to include four names or fewer in the synopsis (just in my opinion). I'll quickly lose track if you include the name of every employee in your main character's office, or the name of the doctor your character visits in one scene and then never appears again.

When I have written synopses, I usually include the name of **the main character, the love interest, an important secondary character, and the villain**. If you can do it without it sounding clunky, instead of dropping the name of Dr. Mulberry, the doctor your character visits in chapter five, you can just say "Marie is told by her doctor that she has superpowers." Marie is the focus of the synopsis, not the doctor, so we don't need to know his name (unless he turns out to be her love interest or the villain or something)!

Step five: Read it out loud.

Does your synopsis tell the story effectively? If there are details that are missing, **add them**. If there are parts that are unnecessary, **cut them**.

Step six: Phone a friend.

The best way to catch unexpected typos, weird phrasing, or confusing plot stuff is to have a friend read over your synopsis. They only need to answer one question: does this synopsis make sense?

Does my synopsis have to sound voicey?

I recently got to be a mentor for a mentorship program, and here is my personal opinion about synopses: I do not need them to be "voicey." I do not need them to be eloquent or flowery or elaborate or pretty. Your synopsis has one job: tell me what happens in the book. You don't have to worry about me getting emotionally invested in the characters. I just want to know what happens in the book.

Have you ever been too scared to watch a scary movie, so you checked its summary on Wikipedia? Your synopsis does the same job. All I want to know is what happens in the book — **INCLUDING SPOILERS**. Don't stop your synopsis short in the name of preventing an agent from reading "spoilers"! They *want* spoilers! They want to know what happens in your book!

Benefits of writing a synopsis

When writing your chapter summaries, you may read a chapter and then realize "I spent 20 pages just having these two characters discuss the weather." Good news! This is a great opportunity for revision.

Or maybe your summary for Chapter Two is "Marie rescues a kitten" and then you see in Chapter Three that "Marie rescues a puppy." Writing chapter summaries gives you a bird's-eye view of the events of your story, and can help you see if your story is too repetitive at parts!

Something else I often identify in my synopses are scenes where my character could be more active. If my chapter summaries feature a lot of passive voice, a lot of things happening *to* my

character, or not very much of my character's name at all, I pause. It could mean that my main character needs to be more active!

For example, if my summary for Chapter Five is "Marie is told by the doctor that she has superpowers," maybe it could be more effective and more character-driven if I rewrote the chapter so that "Marie infiltrates the secret lab and discovers that she has super powers."

The last thing a synopsis can tell you is how directional your story is. What I mean is, if your query promises a book about unicorns, but I read the synopsis and see that one paragraph in it becomes a book about robots, and then about zombies, and then in the end it's a critique of the Dadaist movement in France in an alternate timeline, I'll be a little confused as to how all these events are connected. In my opinion, ideally, **your synopsis should have a thru-line**. A story shouldn't just be a list of events that happen to a character, but rather consequences that were caused by the actions of a character, and a story about how a character grows (or doesn't).

I hope this helps you in your synopsis-writing journeys! Remember, all you need to do is tell us what happens in the story! Good luck, everyone!

I do offer editorial services, and I think my secret superpower is trimming synopses. If your synopsis is too long and you JUST can't figure out a way to get that word count down, let me know—I'm happy to help!



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