

The Long and Short of Writing a Synopsis

Curriculum: ADVANCED

Creator: Dar Bagby

Definition: A synopsis is a narrative of your story—beginning, middle, and ending—showing how characters change and what happens throughout the arc of the plot.

- Goals:**
- 1) Be able to make a distinction between blurb and synopsis.
 - 2) Be able to tell the differences between writing a short synopsis and a long synopsis.
 - 3) Be able to write short and long synopses.
 - 4) Be able to write a short synopsis of someone else’s book.
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- Tools:**
- 1) The **NOVICE HANDOUT** for the NOVICE lesson “Writing the Blurb” (to be given to the enthusiasts who do not have the one from the NOVICE lesson)
 - 2) The **ADVANCED HANDOUTS (#1 and #2)** for this lesson, “The Long and Short of Writing a Synopsis”
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Lesson

- Distribute **ADVANCED HANDOUT #1** to the enthusiasts and ask them to follow along as you discuss:
 - I. The reasons for writing a synopsis
 - A. For submission to an agent
 - B. For submission to a publisher
 - C. For you, as the author
 - II. What the synopsis may reveal
 - A. Flaws in the plot
 - B. Gaps in character development
 - C. Lack of structure
 - D. Missing motivation
 1. Lack of surprise
 2. Nothing unique
 - III. Items to include in the long synopsis
 - A. The story and plot from beginning to end
 1. The basic elements of plot

- a. introduction
- b. rising action
- c. climax
- d. falling action
- e. resolution
- 2. A “short story” type of narrative that incorporates the twists and turns
 - a. Not a step-by-step description
 - b. No dialogue
- 3. A description of the emotions (especially those of the protagonist) that accompany the actions at every turn of events
- 4. The incident that gets the story moving (the conflict)
- 5. Events that illustrate the conflict
- 6. The climax (the turning point that lets the reader know whether the conflict will be resolved)
- 7. The resolution and dénouement
- B. The protagonist’s character progression
 - 1. His/her personality at the beginning of the story
 - 2. How he/she is pressured to change
 - 3. The choice(s) he/she makes toward resolving the conflict
 - 4. If he/she is better off at the end because of the choice(s) he/she made
- C. Progression of the relationship between the protagonist and antagonist (and/or other impact characters)
- D. Thematic considerations
 - 1. Issues your characters struggle with
 - 2. Message or moral of the story

IV. Standard formatting for a synopsis

- A. Always write it in third person (no matter what POV the book is written in).
- B. Always write it in present tense (no matter what tense the book is written in).
- C. Use active voice, not passive
- D. Length
 - 1. Long synopsis: 3-4 pages
 - 2. Short synopsis: preferably not more than one page
 - 3. Remember: LESS IS MORE
- E. Include the title of the book (in italics) and the author’s name in the first paragraph.
- F. The first time (but only the first time) a character is mentioned, his/her name should appear in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.

V. Common mistakes

- A. Describing too many characters
- B. Too much detail about the plot
- C. Presenting the sequence of events out of order
- D. Editorializing (making it sound like an action comic, e.g., “You won’t believe what

happens next!”)

E. Wordiness

1. Remember that short sentences increase action.
2. Books are meant to include all the descriptions; synopses are not.

VI. Steps for writing the synopsis

A. Include a hook line

B. Skim through the manuscript noting the important events of each chapter.

1. Decide on the point of each chapter.
2. Decide on the most important thing that happens in each chapter.
3. Boil each chapter down to one or two sentences.

C. Set up the story and characters.

1. Where and when the story takes place
2. Who the main character is
3. What the problem is that's being faced

D. String your sentences together, one or two for each chapter (this will begin to resemble a short story, but a sparse one, to say the least!)

E. Read through focusing on the plot; edit where necessary.

F. Read through again, this time focusing on the character arcs (how they evolve); edit where necessary.

1. Concentrate on which characters we'll love and which ones we'll hate.
2. Be sure to show what's at stake for the protagonist.

G. Read through again, this time focusing on the characters' goals; edit where necessary.

H. Show how the conflict is resolved.

I. Trim away anything that does not contribute to telling the story.

VII. Writing a short synopsis

A. Start off with a strong first paragraph.

1. Hook line
2. Name of the book (in italics) and the author's name
2. Identify the place and time, the protagonist, and the conflict.

B. Decide which of the turns and twists in the plot are the most important for everything to make sense.

C. Decide which characters, in addition to the protagonist, must be mentioned; you cannot mention them all.

D. The ending paragraph has to show the resolution of the conflict.

1. You **MUST** reveal the ending.
2. Mention the dénouement in order to show that the protagonist has evolved.

VIII. Writing a short synopsis for someone else's book

A. Make notes as you read.

B. Keep your eyes and mind open for a few words that will describe the book's tone.

C. Include only certain specifics.

1. The full title of the book (in italics) and the author's name in the first paragraph
 2. Information the reader must have in order to understand the ideas within the story
- D. Develop an accurate overview of the book.
 E. Write it in third person.
 F. Include at least one quote (with the page number where it can be found).
 G. It should be only 5-7 paragraphs long.

Activity and Discussion: Distribute a copy of **ADVANCED HANDOUT #2** to the enthusiasts and ask them to read the synopsis. When they have finished reading, discuss what they feel is good about it, what is wrong with it, and if they would be interested in reading the book and why or why not.

Overseer's key to the activity

- Good points:
- 1) It is written in third person, present tense.
 - 2) It is easy for the reader to gain an insight into the characters' lives.
 - 3) It demonstrates the arc of the story and includes all of the necessary elements.
 - 4) It describes the conflict in Duncan's life.
 - 5) The resolution occurs when Pam indicates that Duncan is more important to her than Trent is.

Things that should be changed/corrected:

14-year-old DUNCAN is in a station wagon driven by TRENT, his mother's boyfriend.
 Do not use a numeral to open a sentence.

Trent questions where Duncan would rank on a scale of 1 to 10 and guesses aloud the boy is a 3. Though Duncan says nothing, the unkind remark hurts him deeply. Along with Duncan's mother, Pam, the group arrives at an East Coast beach house for summer vacation. While the location is perfect for Trent and Pam, Duncan is terribly out of place and wishes to be with his father instead. Already socially awkward, Duncan is isolated in town because his mother is frequently off with new friends. He chats up a teenage neighbor, SUSANNA, but his lack of practice meeting girls is evident. Sick of the adult antics, Duncan digs out a bike and begins exploring the town, eventually discovering Water Wizz, a local water park.

The first time a character is mentioned, the name should appear in ALL CAPS.
 Should be in quotation marks

Where are the title and author's name? They should appear in the first paragraph.

The park's fun-loving man-child owner, OWEN, takes to the awkward Duncan, and offers him a job. Duncan accepts, and begins secretly working at the park, while not telling

anyone. Duncan meets the park's eccentric employees and slowly begins to gain confidence, even earning the employee nickname of "Pop & Lock" after dancing. Water Wizz becomes Duncan's daily escape, and he takes to Owen as a father figure while also trying to woo Susanna.

As the summer continues, Pam and Trent confront Duncan, saying he is never at the house and is acting distant. Duncan accuses them of the same. Tension in the home grows, gets worse when Duncan sees Trent kissing a neighborhood woman one night (though he stays quiet about it). Later, Pam catches Trent in a lie that reveals his affair. Duncan finally stands up to Trent and shoves him. The two are pulled apart, and Trent reveals to Duncan that he had to spend the summer at the beach because his divorced father did not want him. Later that night, Duncan overhears that his mother will be taking Trent back, and nothing will change.

Duncan seeks comfort in Susanna, who is kind to him, but she is caught aback when he tries to kiss her. Feeling dejected, he heads to Water Wizz and hangs out at an employee party before spending the night there. In the morning, Duncan opens up to Owen, and explains how the park is the only place where he is happy. Owen sympathizes, saying that his relationship with his own father led to him dislike rules. Duncan thanks Owen for everything.

Duncan returns home and apologizes for disappearing, but the damage of the last 24 hours is too great. Pam decides the group should now leave the house and return home early to protect themselves from more conflict. As the awkward drive home begins, Duncan exits the station wagon and runs to nearby Water Wizz, where he completes an amazing water slide challenge the employees thought unachievable. Susanna and Duncan finally kiss. Pam finds her son, and sees how he is a beloved employee at the park. Though Pam takes Duncan away back to the car, he feels closure and happiness about the summer. As the drive home begins again, Pam moves from the front (near Trent) to the back (near Duncan), making it clear who is most important in her life, and also hinting that she may leave Trent yet.

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Handout #1: ADVANCED

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Definition: A synopsis is a narrative of your story—beginning, middle, and ending—showing who changes and what happens throughout the arc of the plot.

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