

How to write a successful synopsis for your unpublished manuscript

Congratulations! The mere fact that you are reading this article suggests that you have finished writing the manuscript for your fiction / non-fiction, children's book or short story. Or that you have almost finished writing it. Or, maybe that you are thinking about writing it! Regardless, you deserve to be congratulated. Entering into the literary world can be a very daunting, challenging and frustrating experience – but well worth the journey. And you should be applauded for taking the plunge!

Right, back to the focus of this article, namely, how to write a synopsis for your completed manuscript. This is never an easy task, especially for those of you who like to use long, meandering sentences and descriptive words. A successful synopsis should be succinct, structured and surprise-free! Follow the simple steps below and take the pain out of summarizing your writing!

Step 1 – Know your manuscript

This sounds simple enough, but you'll be amazed at how easy it is to forget elements of your own work. So before you set about writing a synopsis you must re-read the manuscript in its entirety; make sure you know your words intimately! To help you with 'Step 2', it is often useful to jot down summary notes regarding the key storylines and characters when undertaking your manuscript re-read. It helps focus the mind.

Step 2 – Draft a précis

Once you are confident that you know the characters, storyline and language of your manuscript inside out, you can start to draft a summary of your book. Start by creating an introductory synopsis, which demonstrates the basic storyline of your manuscript and highlights its key selling points. Then draft mini-synopses for each chapter of your book.

Step 3 – Now halve it!

I can almost guarantee that the first draft of your synopsis will be far too long. A well written introductory précis should be between one and two pages, followed by a one page synopsis for each chapter. So the next thing you need to do is edit your synopsis and slim it down! Author Adrian Magson's primary advice is to 'keep it short'. Your final synopsis must focus on the primary story line, don't get bogged down in trying to discuss any secondary storylines unless they are pivotal to the book. At the same time, don't forget to state how the book ends. The synopsis of your manuscript should be a complete reflection of the main storyline – and that includes the ending. Publishers do not like surprises!

Step 4 – Every word counts

When self-editing your synopsis, remember to review every word! A few measly pages provide a tiny amount of text to play with, especially if you are trying to summarize a 100,000 word manuscript. EVERY WORD COUNTS, so use them wisely. Peter Buckman from *The Ampersand Agency* offers some good advice on how to make best use of your word limit. He suggests that, '[agencies and publishers] don't want lengthy summaries of the characters' history and background, but a burst of prose that shows the writer has a distinctive voice and knows about narrative pace and the need for variety in tone'. Your synopsis needs to successfully demonstrate a fine balance between brevity and intrigue.

Step 5 – Don't forget the competition

When you are immersed in your own manuscript, it can be very difficult to take a step back and assess what else is happening in the literary world. But publishers and agencies will be comparing your manuscript, and your synopsis, to competing submissions. You must therefore highlight the key selling points of your work in your initial synopsis. As Author Lynne Hackles says, 'Think of your synopsis as a sales pitch', you need to demonstrate to the reader why your manuscript is better than the competing market. Many publishers and agencies also ask that you complete a direct comparison of your manuscript with other competing titles. Use this as a further opportunity to illustrate how your work stands out above the competition.

Step 6 – Follow the guidelines

As with the submission of your complete manuscript, you must follow the publisher's guidelines on the submission of your synopsis. Andrew Lownie, founder of *The Andrew Lownie Literacy Agency*, says his top synopsis requirements are:

- A 1-page mini-synopsis highlighting what makes the book new and special
- A 1-page market comparison, with a few lines on the five most recent competing and comparable books
- A 1-page synopsis per chapter

A synopsis should be written in present tense, regardless of the tense the manuscript itself is written in. Generally speaking, a synopsis should be typed in a size 12 font with a double spacing paragraph setting. It is also important to highlight each new introduction of a character in the synopsis, so every time you discuss a character for the first time, put their name in CAPITAL LETTERS.

Step 7 – Get a second opinion (if you can bear it!)

Drafting, editing and finalizing the précis to your manuscript are the three primary steps to completing a perfect synopsis. But nothing beats an objective opinion! And so the final piece of advice to share with you would be to get someone else to read your finalised

synopsis. And then ask them to give you an honest review on how well you have pulled it together. Are they able to provide you with an accurate reflection of the main storyline that runs through the manuscript? Can they articulate the personalities of the key characters? Does the synopsis interest them sufficiently – do they want to read the manuscript in its entirety? As painful as it is, nothing beats a critical review of your work from an objective source.

Writing a synopsis can, for many writers, be the hardest part of completing the manuscript submission process. It does however play an important part in securing a publication deal. Many agents and publishers will use the quality of a manuscript's synopsis to decide whether or not to continue reading an author's submission. So make sure you give your synopsis the time and attention it deserves.

