

The Threaded Synopsis: Janet Spaeth, RWA 2009

The best thing about the threaded synopsis is that it lets you control what goes where in your book, while allowing it to weave together into something that is amazingly cohesive. It combines plotting ahead with seat-of-the-pants writing, and garners the best of both worlds.

I use Excel but there are other programs, too, that I'm sure will work.

Make a grid of your characters. Include everyone. I'm a believer in having all characters at least mentioned in each chapter once they're introduced so the reader always knows immediately who Hildegard is, without having to flip back to find out.

Then do a chapter by chapter synopsis on this grid, keeping track of what each person will be doing. There will probably be blanks. That's okay—as long as they're filled in at the end. It's very vague in some parts, and often the words are just reminders to me of a fuller scene that's in my head. Nobody sees this grid except me (and now, you!).

The example here is the initial grid from my upcoming book, *Kind-Hearted Woman*. I've just included the first two chapters. Notice how sparse it is. Yet it makes sense to me.

As you write the story, the spreadsheet will start to fill in.

Expand it from the chapter to the scene. I like to do this at the end or beginning of each writing session so it's not invasive when the flow is going. Again, as long as it makes sense to you, it works.

Watch for aspects of your story that must be mentioned regularly. This might be weather, an animal, a car that refuses to start, whatever. Usually there's something like this in a story. Give it a spot on the grid. In this case, it's Bruno, the dog. He's very important to the black moment of the story, too, so I have to make sure he's doing his Bruno thing in each chapter, setting up that crisis.

Also, this is the time to watch the calendar. Is the calendar moving at the same speed the romance is building?

Start the story. Go back and add in notes as you go along. Characters will appear. That's okay. Add them in where they first appear. You can go back and mend the story if necessary. Don't stop writing. Just note it on the grid.

Don't let the grid get out of control. Keep it simple. Main characters and important secondary characters should have their own columns. The secondary characters that are plot movers or interest adders (my own terms) can go together.

When you're done, you can look at the grid and see if you need to go back and fix something or add something, and where it should go.

But the most important aspect (for me) is that it helps me control revisions. Example: My editor

suggested a garden. Where would be the best place to weave that in? I looked at the synopsis, identified a good spot, added it, and even found a couple of follow-up spots so it's not simply dropped in. This is where the *threading* comes in. You want to weave in all the pieces.

Sometimes you'll find you've left something out entirely. My book is called *Kind-Hearted Woman*, a term that was used during the Depression. Hoboes would identify a home with a kind-hearted woman by drawing a cat (with a heart in its torso) on the door or a fencepost of a home where there was a woman who would feed the hungry travelers. Everybody in the story, it seemed, knew about the carving on the fencepost where the hero faints—everybody except the heroine! I'd neglected to include that. The grid let me quickly scan the structure of the novel to locate the best spot for this scene. And because it was so important, I had to weigh the surrounding scenes.

Deeper revisions can also be made. The editor suggested that the hero needed to have a clearer identity. I looked at his grid, saw where details should have been added, fixed that, and adjusted the other parts of the scene as needed. I strengthened his thread, and wove it in tighter.

She also said that it seemed like August lasted forever in the story. It didn't, but one quick look at the grid and I saw how the reader could think that. I had to fix it. I was able to use the calendar line to adjust the timeline. Doing that meant I had to drop in indicators of a growing romance. This was the thread that had to be woven in. In this case, I used nature to reflect the change in their relationship.

The nice thing about the threaded synopsis is that it's a visual representation of your story. You can quickly find particular areas for revision without flipping through the physical printed out copy or relying on "find" on your computer.

Give it a try and see if your story isn't woven tighter by using the threaded synopsis.

THE THREADED SYNOPSIS—Janet Spaeth

CHAPTER/ Time span	MAIN CHAR.1	MAIN CHAR.2	SEC. CHAR.1	SEC. CHAR. 2	PETS/ITEMS
	What happens	What happens	What happens	What happens	In this column,
	Introduced	Introduced	Introduced	Introduced	track non-human
	Unresolved	Unresolved	Unresolved	Unresolved	story elements,
	Conflict	Conflict	Conflict	Conflict	like dogs or a stolen
	High point	High point	High point	High point	vase.
	Low point	Low point	Low point	Low point	

Do this for each chapter. You won't always have all the points under each heading, but there should be some movement.

- What happens: This is the plot itself. Something has to happen to each character.
- Introduced: Is something new brought in for this character? Perhaps background knowledge to the reader? You'll notice that "Introduced" becomes a bit more complicated further in the story.
- Unresolved: This is the area you especially want to watch. What happened in this chapter that needs to be kept track of?
- Conflict: What conflict? With whom? And why?
- High point: What is the major "thing" for the chapter for the character? There should be something. It doesn't have to be fireworks and parades important, but there should be something. If you can identify that, your character will be growing.
- Low point: As above, but reversed. <G>

My synopses end up with lots of highlighting, arrows connecting characters and events or moving things around.

