

The 15 Minute Synopsis: How to Create a Selling Synopsis Fast

Benefits to the “15 Minute” Synopsis:

- ◆ People respond to a deadline, gets adrenaline going and puts you in the mindset to find solutions
- ◆ Forces you to look at the “big picture” of the story quickly
- ◆ Simplifying conflict and plot to write a quick summary allows for further brainstorming and gives a framework for creative possibilities
- ◆ Satisfaction of having a complete story idea to work with (you can’t edit a blank page).
- ◆ Learn how to take advantage of opportunities and meet tight schedules
- ◆ Builds experience with planning a story and that speeds up plotting and synopsis writing

1. Getting Started – The Romantic Conflict

Start with Conflict! Here are the Basic Questions to start thinking about in your mind (or on paper):

- ◆ Who is your hero? Who is your heroine? Why can they not have a loving relationship? Why are they not ready? What is holding them back? What holds them back from love is their internal conflict. Make certain your problem is clear and specific, so you can quickly see the problems that need to be solved to make these people whole so they are ready to embrace love. The love interest—the other protagonist—brings the solution—but it’s not an easy solution.
- ◆ What is their romantic conflict? Why is the heroine the wrong person for the hero? Why is the hero the wrong person for the heroine? It is easier (and faster) to create strong conflict if the hero and heroine do not specifically trust/want/love each other, not just “I don’t want to get married/fall in love/trust men.”

What growth must hero/heroine go through in order for the relationship to work? How will the hero challenge the heroine and force her to grow emotionally (and vice versa)? How can you show this in the story—what dark moment will trigger that growth?

Now you know what the hero and heroine want to avoid. This is the basis for the romantic conflict in the story. It is important that you bluntly tell an editor *how they grow and why they love each other*.

To write a strong synopsis quickly, you need to create a sound foundation. You need to define your story as:

- ◆ One sentence
- ◆ One paragraph
- ◆ One page (or two)

2. One Sentence: The Tagline and Story Question

Creates two single sentence summaries:

- ◆ The Tagline deals with the characters, conflict, and the plot of the story.
- ◆ The Story Question deals with the theme.

With these two sentences you have the complete story.

Here is an example from Sharon's January Aphrodisia release, *Blood Red*: A proper young lady yearns to be a vampire hunter until two sexy vampires fulfill her wildest fantasies. She teaches the Demon Twins about love, but can she pledge herself to a hot, passionate threesome for eternity?

The Tagline

Start with a tagline for the book. Don't go for the obscure 'high-concept' i.e. X-men meets Desperate Housewives, make **characters** and **conflict** the key. Use descriptive words to show conflict. A feisty bluestocking. A jaded undercover cop. A terrified single mother on the run.

The beauty of the tagline is that you immediately have the basis for your synopsis. You know why there is a story and where it is supposed to go. You have the central driving force (narrative drive) for the characters—and be specific. What is the cost of failure? Both the external cost (to the world, community, etc) and the internal (to the characters). Once you have the central driving force, you should start to see how the story can be resolved.

What if your story is finished? Having a finished manuscript means you know your story intimately but you may find it hard to cut away at all the detail to create a synopsis. By building up, not cutting away, you get to the core story faster.

The Story Question

The Story Question isolates the emotional growth (the character arc) of your hero and heroine. Example from Sharon's synopsis for *Sin*: "A woman can rescue herself, can't she?" The driving motivation for my heroine is control, to be in charge of her own destiny, and 'rescue herself'. The hero will work in opposition to the heroine's story question.

That sentence provides the theme for the story and the characters' basic conflict. The resolution is the answer to that question. In *Sin*, the heroine proves she can rescue herself, but learns that love provides a partnership, friendship, and intimacy that she wants more.

The tagline helps isolate external conflict, while the story question suggests internal conflict and theme.

3. One Paragraph - The Blurp

You can actually use one to three paragraphs. Focus on the hero/heroine, what they want and why they can't have it. A three paragraph structure gives a good framework. You can spend 1 paragraph on each character, setting up their goals, motivation, and conflict. The third paragraph is the narrative drive of the story and the resolution. Think about these questions:

- ◆ What is pushing them forward? If your character can back out, then you don't have enough dramatic tension. What is keeping them together (external plot)?
- ◆ What is the climax?
- ◆ What lesson is learned?

4. One Page (or Two)—The Quick Synopsis:

Start by introducing the hero and heroine, one paragraph for each. Tell the editor the character's motivations and internal (romantic) conflicts in a clear and concise way. Remember that in a

synopsis, you TELL. Don't let the editor try to infer it. Here is an example from Sharon's synopsis for *Sin*:

“Venetia Hamilton is determined to save her family from dire poverty without resorting to a dull, dismal marriage. Put herself in a man's power? Never! As for love, it is a woman's folly and Venetia vows love will never imprison her.

Polite society has no idea Venetia is the illegitimate daughter of the famous erotic artist Rodesson. Now arthritic and unable to paint, Rodesson gambled away his rights to his past works. Armed with her talent and her father's books, virginal Venetia rescues her mother and sisters by secretly drawing erotic art. Fortunately, her inventive versions of her father's sensual collections are flying off bookstore shelves. But her father has revealed the truth—to a gorgeous gentleman who now holds the power to ruin them all.”

At the end of your introduction to the heroine and hero, you will have shown the dramatic first meeting that brings them together, and show what is going to force them together. Remember to ask:

- ◆ What does your hero want? What does your heroine want? What human needs are they addressing? (This opens your synopsis.)
- ◆ What personal issues drive your hero and heroine forward? You need a constant sense of forward motion.
- ◆ What personal issues hold your hero and heroine back? They feel pain or fear that makes it hard for them to press on. (These two points are the bulk of your story.)
- ◆ What is your hero and heroine's defining moment? (The climax/black moment).
- ◆ At the climax, your characters need to change, to face what's holding them back, and press forward against all odds. What realization or decision must they make? (The resolution—the satisfying ending).

To write a quick synopsis, focus on the opening (the set up of heroine and hero (or heroes) and their conflicts) and the ending (the black moment/climax, what the characters have learned emotionally and the declaration of love and commitment). You can summarize the middle of the book—this is the “and then stuff happens” part of the book.

What Happens in the Middle of the Book?

The narrative drive is the external plot—the event that drives the story (catch the killer, escape the villain, save the world, etc.) You want to force yourself to quickly envision this external framework. The faster you try to do it, the more you will simplify your conflict and plot. What scenes do you have to experience to feel satisfied with this story? See the last section for plotting technique hints.

Once you have a your plot, you will want to summarize it in a quick synopsis (“and then stuff happens”), but still make it emotional and dramatic. Here are two examples of summing up big sections of plot—note the focus on the emotional and romantic development.

“Partnering Venetia in her investigation, Michael admires her belief in justice. But when he saves Venetia from several ‘accidents’—a falling urn, a tumbling suit of armor, a bolting horse—each

close call intensifies his fear of losing her. Could the terror gripping his heart be love?" (From synopsis for *Sin* by Sharon Page)

- ◆ Summarize external events but end each paragraph with the emotional impact and the development of the romance. If there is a ticking clock to your plot, make it clear and keep playing it up

The Satisfying Ending

- ◆ You sell your next book with the ending – sell this book with the ending of your synopsis.
- ◆ My background is in product design and in that industry there are two steps to the design process called “All questions asked; all questions answered.” Make sure you clearly TELL the editor how the characters have grown and what they have learned through development of the romantic relationship. Tell why the characters are now ready for a happily ever after ending.
- ◆ Ensure you have shown a clearly dramatic and exciting black moment.
- ◆ Include a unique proposal or declaration of love the agent, editor, and reader will never forget.

For Quick Reference: The “Synopsis Road Map” (as outlined by author Nonnie St. George)

(Opening Hook)

Pp1: The protagonist’s ordinary world, internal conflict, inciting incident

Pp2: Same as paragraph 1, but for the other character (hero or heroine)

Pp3: The external story that brings them together. The emotional conflict.

Pp4 & subsequent: important external events and their effect on the character.

Final pp: Love story conclusion

5. What Makes the Synopsis Sell?

- ◆ Voice – you want your synopsis to showcase your voice and your talent. Don’t dryly list the facts.

Here’s an example from Sharon’s synopsis for *Sin*: “Marcus has kissed many women but Venetia’s eager kiss is the first to shake him to his gleaming boots, even as he recognizes the innocence in it. But does his fascination with her delectable blend of naiveté and sensual imaginativeness prove he’s the same type of scoundrel as his father?” A few adjectives and word choices pump up the synopsis.

- ◆ The level of sex – clearly tell the agent/editor the level of sex in the story. If it’s erotic romance, sex should be shown to play a greater part in the plot. If there’s only one love scene, use the synopsis to show its importance. Don’t forget to build sexual tension!

- ◆ Drama, passion, and humor – just as you want to showcase your voice, you must use strong word choices to reflect the tone of the story in your synopsis.

Here is an example from Sharon’s synopsis for “*Midnight Prowl*”, a dark, dramatic paranormal: “But Strand, who once prowled London’s streets like a wild beast, will now make the perfect assassin. Hunger for vengeance roars through Strand’s weakened body, but as he is dragged before his Sire, he sees his younger brother, Bow—also a vampire—held captive with a stake at his heart.”

The tone helps tell the agent/editor how to market to story—is it sexy? Kick ass? Dark? Humorous?

- ◆ For a romance editor, the *romance* is going to be the most compelling thing. For your plot points, focus on romantic moments such as the first kiss, the first time they make love, etc. Highlight the emotional risks and the characters' emotional growth.

How Do You Develop the Story? Some Methods and Techniques of Developing Plot:

- ◆ **The Turning Point Method** (2 turning points and a black moment):
Plot can be divided into 4 sections:
The Set Up, Increasing Intimacy, Obstacles and Misery, Resolution and HEA.
- ◆ **20 Things That Must Happen to Resolve the Story**
Make a list of twenty things that 'must' happen in the novel.
Or start with three major plot points to the story, then fill in the rest. This starts to give an outline for chapters.
- ◆ **The Three Act Structure** used for writing screenplays:
Act 1: 30 pages SET-UP
Act 2: 60 pages ESCALATION OF CONFLICT
Act 3: 20-30 pages CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION

ACT 1: THE SET-UP (First 10 pages in a script)

In the First Ten minutes is where we meet the Protagonist and establish the Premise. The entire story is launched from this segment. A good way to think of it: if someone reads only the First 10 pages of the script, will they know what the rest of the movie is going to be about? The answer should be yes.

The Hook - Near the end of the First Act: A surprising development that turns the story on its ear, introducing a wild new element that changes everything

ACT II: ESCALATION OF CONFLICT

A series of developments that escalate the conflict, gradually higher and higher, until it is ready to boil over into the Third Act, when you will begin to move things toward a Final Confrontation and Resolution.

Second Act Crisis - memorable sequence or event that achieves a particularly high point of energy. (About the half-way point.)

Second Act Twist - A Hook for the Second Act. The Point of No Return that is so severe, it leaves the characters no choice but to face their Obstacles once and for all.

ACT III: Climax/Final Confrontation

The last, big scene, where everything comes to head.

Resolution

Your answer to the Thematic Question, the lesson about life you wish to impart to your audience, which you will show through the way the story resolves itself. This could also be called a Dramatic Answer.

Falling Action

There's usually a little winding down at the end.

- ◆ Think of the **Resolution** and develop a plot that leads there. For example: the man who can't live up to his father's expectations has a big heart to heart with dad at the end. Respect is earned/given. When you know where you are going at the start, it's easier to get there.
- ◆ Start with time-honored plots and conflicts: The Bad Boy, Class Conflict, Reunion for example. Or Myths, Fairy Tales, and Legend stories—Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella, etc.
- ◆ Start with “Five events to include in your synopsis” (courtesy of Pam McCutcheon):
 - Ordinary World:** Who, what and where your character is before the story begins.
 - New Direction:** Event that forces your character to take action.
 - Change of Plans:** Near the middle. Where the plan your characters first came up with falls apart and they have to scramble to come up with something new.
 - Black Moment.** The time right before the climax when all the odds are stacked against your character and it seems impossible for them to win.
 - Resolution and End** where your character pulls it off and triumphs.