

6. THE STORY SYNOPSIS

The story synopsis or outline can take many forms; it has no rigid format. But the synopsis, like the manuscript, should be double-spaced and highly legible, with frequent paragraphing.

Some synopses cover the whole story, while others supplement a portion of completed manuscript and presuppose the reader's familiarity with that portion. If you have broken your novel into chapters, that's a useful way to divide your synopsis also. You may find, however, that what you thought would fit into one chapter will expand into two or three.

The major element of the synopsis, and sometimes the only element, is the narrative.

- *Usually in present tense*

On a fine spring day in 1923, Lucy Williams applies for a job working for a mysterious millionaire.

- *Names and describes major characters*

Lucy's new boss is Donald Matthews, a handsome young businessman scarcely older than Lucy, but with an unsavory reputation as a rumored bootlegger.

- *Summarizes major events in the story*

Hurrying home through the storm, Lucy bumps into Kenneth Holwood, Donald's former partner. Holwood seems deranged, and hints at some terrible secret in Donald's past.

- *Indicates the story's point of view*

Lucy mails the package despite her qualms; she wonders what it might contain. Meanwhile, in a shabby hotel room across town, Holwood meticulously plans the death of Donald Matthews. (This shows us that the story's point of view is third person omniscient; we will skip from one viewpoint to another as events require.)

- *Contains virtually no dialogue*

Donald invites Lucy to dinner at a notorious speakeasy, saying she'll enjoy herself more than she thinks she will.

A list of major characters' names (with brief descriptions) can sometimes be helpful in keeping the story straight; if used, such a list usually goes at the beginning of the synopsis.

A background section sometimes precedes the synopsis itself, especially if the story's context requires some explanation. (This seems especially true of science fiction, fantasy, and historical novels, where the plot may hinge on unfamiliar story elements.) Otherwise, such explanation simply crops up where required in the synopsis.

How long should a synopsis be? I've sold some novels with just two or three pages. Other writers may write forty or fifty pages of outline. If your purpose is to interest an editor before the novel is completed, and you expect the total ms. to run to 90,000 to 120,000 words, a synopsis of four to ten doublespaced pages should be adequate. After all, you're trying to tempt the editor by showing her a *brief* sample, giving her grounds for a decision without a long investment in reading time.

Should you stick to your synopsis? Not necessarily. It's there to help you and your editor, not to dictate the whole story. Like the itinerary of a foreign tour, it should give you a sense of direction and purpose while leaving you free to explore interesting byways; it should also give you a quick return to the main road if the byway turns into a dead end.

Assignment:

Write a synopsis of your planned or in-progress novel, or revise your existing synopsis to follow these guidelines. To make it a challenge, limit the synopsis to three single-spaced pages in a 12-point font. That's about 1500 words. To make it more of a challenge, give yourself 90 minutes to write the synopsis. If you can write a thousand words of rough draft in an hour, you have a very useful skill.

From Write a Novel (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/novel/>), a resource created by Crawford Kilian, Communications Instructor at Capilano College, North Vancouver BC.

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