

The Key to a Synopsis

A guide to crafting an effective synopsis.

A synopsis remains the bane of existence for a lot of writers. You've finally finished your book and had it edited, polished, and ready to send out into the world. But now, you need to write the whole thing again in only 1-2 pages. Yikes!

This can feel impossible, especially trimming your entire world you've crafted down to only a single page. That's why I've compiled tips and a sample to help you craft your synopsis!

MEET THE EDITOR



Both before and after starting MadHope Editorial, I have been in and out of the querying trenches to help writers improve their craft and (hopefully!) improve their request rate. While there is no true magic formula in such a subjective business, I've compiled my knowledge to help give you the best chance at standing out in an agent's inbox.

Sample Synopsis

Below is an example synopsis. It is not based off a real book or meant to imitate any existing story. It is for educational purposes only.

FLIGHT INTERRUPTED: A Synopsis

MARY SUE (24) takes the flight test to become an astronaut and struggles with her fear of space, making her nearly crash the simulation. She manages to fix her mistake and joins her best friend, Bruce Sow (25) outside to wait for the results. She's shocked when she finds out that she passed. Her instructor, MR. COLA (54), puts her and Bruce on Flight Crew 12 to investigate odd signals coming from Mars.

After spending the night suffering from panic attacks, Mary joins the crew in the morning to get ready for takeoff. Her crew includes Bruce, an arrogant top-class astronaut STACEY UP (26) and the quiet, reclusive HOWARD COW (30). Tension is thick in the group during training. They leave the next day for Mars and spend several days bickering. Mary struggles with her anxiety at the darkness of space around them, but hides it from the others.

One week into their flight, a green light flashes outside the windows of the ship and makes them stop. Their communication hardware breaks, leaving them stranded from Earth. Blue aliens board the ship and demand that the crew hand over the engine core. It is a valuable piece of equipment and Mary's only way back home.

Mary bargains with them to let the crew at least reach Mars so they won't be stranded in space. The aliens agree. On the way, Stacey fights with Mary over her choice to give the aliens the engine core. Their fight fractures the group more and Mary feels stranded within her crew.

During the travel, an alien named GROK approaches Mary when she's having a panic attack and eases her breathing. They discuss Mary's anxiety about space and her desire to live up to her dad's name. Mary realizes that there is more to Grok than meets the eye.

After a few surprising revelations, an unexpected third party arrives and attacks Mary and the aliens. She and Grok band together to fight the new aliens. Mary learns that she has power and she can fight on her own if she just believes in herself. When she gets back to Earth, she works with the president of the academy to let Grok and the other aliens work with future astronauts to explore more of the world.

Breaking Down the Sample

There are some obvious issues with this synopsis, so let's break them down.

Formatting

Synopses should generally be single spaced, 12pt font, with names fully capitalized when we first meet a new character.

Obviously the formatting is a bit different in ways we'll ignore—such as the synopsis not being on its own single page. When it is, it does come to a single page in length, which is what we want. A synopsis should generally be 1-2 pages with very few exceptions. However, there are other formatting issues here. In the first paragraph, "Bruce Sow" isn't capitalized, while every other character name is when first introduced. What is more important than this detail is consistency.

Content

The content of a synopsis should include every important plot point of the novel without leaving anything out. This is where you spoil the twists and leave no surprises to the imagination. It should be as detailed as possible without getting bogged down in small scenes that don't affect the overall plot. A synopsis is not where you pitch the book. Pitching happens in the query letter. A synopsis should explain everything that happens factually. If it feels boring to write, you're doing it right!

This synopsis has a lot of issues with content that mostly come in the last few paragraphs. First, we're told "after a few surprising revelations..."

Since this is a play-by-play of the book, we should know what these revelations are. Nothing should be kept a secret or a mystery. On top of that, the ending is rushed and shows issues that the manuscript likely suffers from. We completely forget about the stolen engine core, leaving that plot thread with no resolution. The synopsis also introduces a third party enemy without naming them and doesn't resolve the fight with them, either.

Writing Your Synopsis

Now let's break it down to make your own synopsis.

1. Major Plot Points

- a. First, write down every plot point. It can help to write a summary of each chapter as you're drafting, but you can do it afterwards, too!
- b. After you're done, cut all of the scenes that don't tie into the overarching plot. For example, we don't need to know what your character ate for dinner on the fourth day. Unless it's poisoned.

Exercise:

Fill out information about your book:

- a. One-sentence pitch:

This should guide what plot beats to include. You should have this pitch ready if you used the query craft sheet.

- b. Main Characters (Name & Age)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Main characters are those who directly or indirectly influence the main plot. You don't need to name every single character, such as GUARD 1 or RANDOM GUY 2.

Tip!

Put your character names in ALL CAPS when first introducing them. From then on, you can write normally.

Ex: MARY SUE (24) went to the store. After Mary left, she ran into BILL SOW (45).

Now put it all together in a single document. The whole thing should be around 1-2 pages. At the top, put the title of your manuscript followed by: Synopsis.



How'd You Do?

Just like that, you have a synopsis draft on your hands! If you're still not sure about it or need an extra pair of experienced eyes on your synopsis, feel free to reach out through the form on MadHope Editorial's website!

<https://madheditorial.com/contact>