

CREATING A SELLING SYNOPSIS

by Sandy Steen

In today's market a synopsis is not a luxury - it's a necessity. It's the first thing an agent or editor will ask for and their reading time is valuable, so you have to be brief. **1 to 3 pages, max.** Trust me, a well-written synopsis as the best marketing tool you'll ever have.

Let's begin with understanding the difference between a storyline and a plot. A storyline tells the story, just hitting the high spots-**a sketchy overview**. The plot contains the basics of the storyline and most important, motivation-a **dimensional overview**.

STORYLINE: One day, our hero, Jack, decides to wash his new Porsche, which he claims came to him via the will of Bob, a recently departed wealthy friend. His newly acquired girlfriend, Jill, volunteers to help. Bucket in hand; they trudge up a hill to a private well on the back of Jack's property. They fill the bucket and start back, but Jack trips and falls down the hill. Jill deliberately tumbles after him. When they get to the bottom, she hits Jack over the head with the empty bucket and forces him to confess he killed her former boyfriend Wealthy Bob, to get his expensive car.

PLOT: In the sleepy little town of Anywhere, USA on a sunny, Sunday afternoon in May, our hero, Jack, is so crazy over his new Porsche he can't stand to see it dirty and decides to wash it. He's surprised and thrilled when Jill, the girlfriend of the late Wealthy Bob, stops by and offers to help. Forever bragging about his bedroom conquests, he has always wanted Jill.

Our heroine, Jill, may be a winsome blonde, but she's no airhead. Nothing is what it seems, and she didn't just happen by Jack's place. She's been shadowing him for the last two weeks hoping to get evidence to support her theory that he killed Wealthy Bob for the Porsche.

Jack's flirting works for what Jill has in mind. Positive she can charm him into giving himself away, her plan is complicated when she discovers he hasn't paid his water bill, and they are forced to trudge up a hill at the back of his property to fetch water in a bucket. Frustrated and angry, Jack is in no mood to put up with female wiles. When he trips and falls down the hill the situation goes from bad to worse.

Her plan down the tube, Jill decides to confront Jack and force him to confess. She deliberately tumbles after him. When they reach the bottom, she grabs the empty bucket and hits him in the head, knocking him out. When he comes to, he finds himself propped against the car, hands and his feet bound with Duct tape. His eyes pop open to

the sound of a gun being cocked. Inches away Jill kneels beside him with a Glock pointed right at his crouch. She wants the truth, or he'll be singing soprano, if he sings at all.

Thinking he'll tell her what she wants while working to free his hands, Jack tells her how he won Wealthy Bob's trust then talked Bob into letting him drive the Porsche. One night they rode out into the country to a spot where Jack had stashed a gun. He killed Bob and made it look like a robbery gone bad. But it wasn't just for the car; he wanted her, too. When Jill says she is taking him to the cops, he merely laughs. He won't repeat what he just said. It'll be her word against his and she has no evidence. "Wanna bet?" Jill insists and with a big smile holds up the tape recorder that has been inside her shirt pocket and running the whole time. She dials 911 on her cell. The end.

The plot, which is the basis of your synopsis, **MUST** address **characterization** and most important of all - **motivation**. Because what motivates the characters influences how they will act, then react, how they will talk and ultimately how they will resolve their conflicts.

There are two main synopsis formats: (See examples below)

Summary (informal) This type of synopsis is a narrative summary of your plot. It should begin with a "hook" paragraph then move right into plot, including character analysis within the body of the summary. Detail conflict and complications, then resolution but no need to detail every scene.

Block/Outline (formal) This type of synopsis should also begin with a "hook" paragraph, then follow with setting, characters analysis both major and minor, then finally plot.

Regardless of which format you select the main body of the synopsis have the same key ingredients:

1. Setting: Date (not necessarily specific) and location of the story.

2. Characterization: *"You should know them so well you would recognize them if they walked into a room", Sandra Brown.*

Major Characters – physical **and** emotional characteristics of hero and heroine, including goals and motivation.

Minor Characters - identify relationship to major characters and part they play in the plot.

OK, let's talk a little bit about characterization. Honestly, I'm a character fiend. It's what makes me watch any TV show or movie and absolutely what compels me to read any book. The difference between real people and your characters is that real people are bat you-know-what crazy. They're inconsistent, do things "on a whim", or something totally "out of character" for no good reason. But **not** your characters. They **must have adequate motivation** showing why they do and say what they do.

The important thing you should remember **character equals plot**. Create memorable, believable characters and they will tell your story for you. “If you take those decisions into your own hands, you'll end up making huge errors in logic, and your character will become a stick figure instead of a living, breathing person.”
Constance K. Flynn

So, how do we go about creating these characters? Four points I call Compass Characterization:

NORTH, the character's true north, his strong central core values. They should be admirable and reader identifiable.

SOUTH, shady side of North. He may be honest to a fault because his father was terrible liar. He will tell the truth even if it hurts someone he cares for, or if it gets him in trouble. A heroine might now be passionate about women's rights, because she had an abortion as a teenager.

Remember: All villains have a heroic trait or two and all heroes have a couple of villainous traits. Because nobody is perfect.

EAST, the supportive traits. Consistent to the core traits but may be traits he doesn't share. City boy that secretly longs for quiet of the country, Says children make him nervous but was an only child and longs for a big family.

WEST, the fatal flaw. Consistent with core and supportive traits and overcoming them helps the character grow. Traits like needing family can become controlling to the point of losing loved ones. Or so honest that bluntness offends people. The same trait that makes the character ambitious can also cause him to bulldoze his way through life until he has no close relationships outside of his career.

When creating characters enhance your efforts by using words/descriptions that reflect his/her occupation, location, etc. For example:

Male / Black hair / brown eyes / scar

The **man** paused in the doorway of the smoke-filled **waterfront** pub for several seconds as if hesitant to become part of the rank-smelling atmosphere, then he stepped inside. Like most of the men in the squalid establishment, he was a sailor, a **seafaring man** given to drink, and like many of the others; he was looking for a **berth** on a good ship. A stout man, thick from **stem to stern**, he made his way to the bar and ordered a **tankard** of ale. He resembled the rest of the patrons except he smiled less. His **black** curly **hair** hung almost to his shoulders and showed gray at the temples. His **brown eyes**, once known for their twinkle, were now dull with age. And of course, there was the **scar**. Long and raised like a ghostly welt, it started near the top of his head, running down the right side of his face, down his neck and across his chest like the imprint of a lightning bolt seared into his flesh. He scanned the crowd searching for the one that gave it to him.

So, what does the reader know in one paragraph? Location, occupation, body type, physical traits and that he's seeking revenge.

Or you can use location as character:

Gossip was alive and well in McCauley, Texas. As usual it spread through the small Texas town like poison ivy at a summer camp. The former resident bad boy had returned.

It's a balancing act, but not to fear. There are some tips and tricks to help keep you on the characterization catwalk, so to speak. There are character sheets that will, if you fill them out, be a great help.

3. Plot Presentation: - Set-up can include information that takes place before story begins and/or brief history setting up conflict between characters.

4. Conflict/Complications - the basic conflict between hero and heroine, both external (he's a reformed jewel thief / she's a cop) and internal (he lost his wife, fears love / she can't keep love because of the job) Incidents should complicate the conflict as story progresses to crisis.

5. Crisis/Climax - the highest emotional point of the story and the physical plot

6. Resolution - the unraveling of all the ends and outs of story, tying all loose ends, clarification and character change.

Sound familiar? Sure, these are the ingredients you've probably been given a hundred times in workshops on how to put a story together. And just as these are the basics for constructing a good plot, they are the basis for constructing a good synopsis. The main difference is characterization and motivation **clearly stated**. You may have your story fully developed in your head, but the trick is to make it crystal clear to an editor or agent.

Now that you know your characters and what motivates them, select a format and begin. And here is a little trick to help keep you on track called the **4 M's**:

For a mystery:

Murder-at the beginning or can happens off stage. Think *Murder, She Wrote*.

Mishap-murderer left something behind, witness or mcguffin.

Muddle-hero or detective works to solve/murder tries to mislead.

Moment of Truth-hero or detective confronts killer.

For romance:

Meeting-whatever your story calls for.

Mishap-they discover they have a conflict.

Muddle-events intensify the conflict.

Moment of Truth-misunderstandings and issues resolved.

One of the pluses of constructing a good synopsis is having to completely formulate your story...on paper. Once you've accomplished that, you have a more cohesive, overall picture of your story and you can more readily see if there is any weakness in your plot or characters. And you have a jumping off point for a chapter-by-chapter outline if you desire. Think of it as drawing a road map, without which you would probably take a wrong turn or miss your destination all together.

All of this does not mean you have to follow your synopsis line for line. You'll deviate to some degree simply because as your plot develops you will need to expand some scenes or delete others. It's the ebb and flow of writing.

While you probably dread doing it, and find it hard to believe now, constructing a synopsis really will make your writing life easier. Like the commercial boasts: Try it; you'll like it.

S A M P L E: S U M M A R Y

Ima Writer
1000 Sale Street
Royalties, TX

Synopsis
Contemporary
Approx. 85,000 words

THE BROKEN CROWN AFFAIR

When Jack finally gets the car of his dreams, a Porsche, there is only one more thing he needs to make his life just about perfect, a girl named Jill. He's already committed murder to get the car, and he'll do that much or more to get Jill.

For months Wealthy Bob had both the car and the girl, but not anymore. Jack worked hard to become friends with Wealthy Bob and build trust. Finally, Bob agreed to let him drive the Porsche. Late one night, with Jack behind the wheel, they rode to a secluded part of the country. Jack had convinced Wealthy Bob they were going to meet some hookers but when they arrived, he forced Bob to write a note stating that in the event of his death he wanted Jack to have the Porsche. Then he killed Bob and made it look like a robbery. Having hidden his own car earlier, he drove back to town with nobody the wiser. Or so he thought.

Jill loved Wealthy Bob despite his money and knew in her heart something was wrong with the robbery scenario of his death. She had known all along that Jack was a user and attracted to Wealthy Bob's money, but when he "inherits" Bob's car she becomes suspicious. Could he have killed Wealthy Bob to get the car? She is determined to find out the truth.

Etc., etc., etc.

SAMPLE: BLOCK/OUTLINE

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SETTING: Present day, anywhere, USA, on a sunny afternoon in May.

CHARACTERS:

Antagonist (Hero) – Jack is a selfish young man who will stop at nothing to get what he wants, even if that means murder.

Protagonist (Heroine) – Jill is a smart, resourceful young woman who, after losing the love of her life, is determined to bring his killer to justice.

PLOT:

Jack is so enamored of his new Porsche that he can't stand to see it dirty and decides to wash it. He's surprised and thrilled when Jill, the girl friend of the late Wealthy Bob, stops by and offers to help. Forever bragging about his bedroom conquests, he has always wanted Jill.

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