

# **HOW TO WRITE A SYNOPSIS THAT SELLS**

**THE PRODUCER'S PERSPECTIVE**  
EXECUTION PLAN SERIES

**PRO**

## SO, YOU NEED A SYNOPSIS, HUH?

Everything is asking for one these days - applications for grants, submissions to theaters, profiles for websites - and writing one always seems to be a major stumbling block for many of the writers that I've been speaking with.

Well, I want to help you out.

First, I want to quickly clear something up... There has always been a bit of confusion regarding the differences between a synopsis, a plot summary, and a blurb. So let's define a few things:

- A **synopsis** is a summation of the main story arc of your piece from beginning to end, typically told in 4-5 sentences.
- A **summary/outline** is a far more granular, detailed retelling of the story that likely goes beat by beat from beginning to end. Think of this as if you were telling all the events of your story, but skipping the dialogue. Usually 1-2 pages.
- A **blurb** is a short and sweet (usually a couple of sentences) bit of text that provides minimal story details and usually ends with a tag or invitation into the text ("Two brothers sworn to secrecy. One betrayal. Who will survive?" That sort of thing). Usually used for marketing/advertising purposes (or for pitching the project) where you want to let folks know what the show "is" without giving it all away.

So now we know the various types of summation. Does your application, profile or what-have-you require a synopsis? Then let's get into it!



**ACTION EXERCISE:** Write a 4-5 sentence synopsis of your show now without diving deeper into this execution plan. You'll have a chance to write another one later, and see how far you've grown in just a few pages!

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Got your first draft done? Awesome. Let's learn how to make it even more compelling.

The first thing to do when attempting to write a synopsis is to throw away any misconceptions or fears regarding what you put into it. You say to yourself, “But my twist ending! I don’t want anyone to know the butler did it!” or “I want them to buy a ticket to find out if my heroine finds her princess!”

I hear you. I really do. Theater is all about setting up expectations and suspense.

However, building suspense and leaving your audience hanging is what a good blurb does. In a synopsis, you need to let go of all of that urge to leave folks hanging and know that you’re going to be giving up the goods.

You also may say to yourself, “But! My secondary arc with the irreverent donkey that finds true love in an unexpected place is really cool and supports my underlying themes of inclusion and equality!”

I hear you. That sounds awesome (and familiar). Great writing will have secondary or even tertiary (and beyond) arcs that support the themes and motifs of the main story.

However, you have a paragraph to tell us the main story of your piece. Keep it laser-focused, and rest assured that folks will still appreciate the additional layers of your piece, even if they were not included in the initial synopsis.

Remember, most times synopses are being included in applications to theaters or grants or other more insider situations as a complement to either your entire text or a segment of it. Particularly for those instances where only a 10-page sample is requested, for example, your synopsis is potentially the only opportunity for the reviewer to read the totality of your story – so you need to show that the piece is clear, complete, and contains five essential elements.

(As an added bonus, a well-written synopsis tells me that you not only know exactly how your story operates, but that you are also able to communicate it succinctly and evocatively, both of which are qualities that I always want to see in a potential collaborator or candidate for a development opportunity.)

The five essential elements of a strong synopsis are:

- An **introduction to/definition** of the protagonist.
- The **inciting incident**.
- The **escalation**.
- The **final crisis**.
- The **resolution/definition** of how the protagonist has changed.

Does this all sound familiar?



If you've done any amount of study of story structure, then you'll likely recognize this as a pretty archetypal breakdown of the climactic story structure: a protagonist has a want, an unexpected event puts them down a new path with unforeseen obstacles, the actions of the protagonist leads to greater and greater obstacles, leading to a final crisis, the resolution of which includes the final reckoning for our protagonist (they either succeeded or failed in their aims, and the requisite rewards or punishments are doled out).

Of course, this synopsis structure may not immediately speak to you. Perhaps your story is far more episodic, not told chronologically, or is more of an ensemble piece with no clear, singular, protagonist.

Despite how your story unfolds, it likely still contains these elements (perhaps simply not in this order), and for ease of communication I would suggest at least attempting this style of synopsis. After all, even the most abstract of work likely still has a hero and a beginning, middle and end.

For stories with no clear protagonist, it may be helpful to speak of the group as a whole rather than attempting to unravel each narrative thread. Define the group and explore how the actions of the story change the group dynamic as a whole.

Let's break these elements down:

## INTRODUCTION/DEFINITION OF THE PROTAGONIST

Your protagonist is the one who propels the action of your piece (they are not always a "hero," but that's a debate for another day). They want something, often in spite of the circumstances that they find themselves in (think Romeo and Juliet), and we follow their journey in overcoming obstacles to attempt to attain that want. A great story will also include a great risk or loss if they fail to achieve their goal. Those are what we (and any gambler) call the stakes. Along with our protagonist, we often will get a sense of their world, or what the "norm" is.



**ACTION:** Describe your protagonist and their want/goal in one sentence

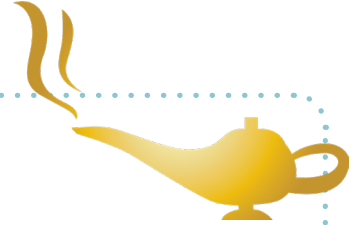
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## THE INCITING INCIDENT

This is the unexpected event that turns the protagonist's world/norm upside down and propels them into action. It is Aladdin finding the genie's lamp, it is Hamlet receiving his dead father's demand for justice, it is Sandy arriving at Rydell High...

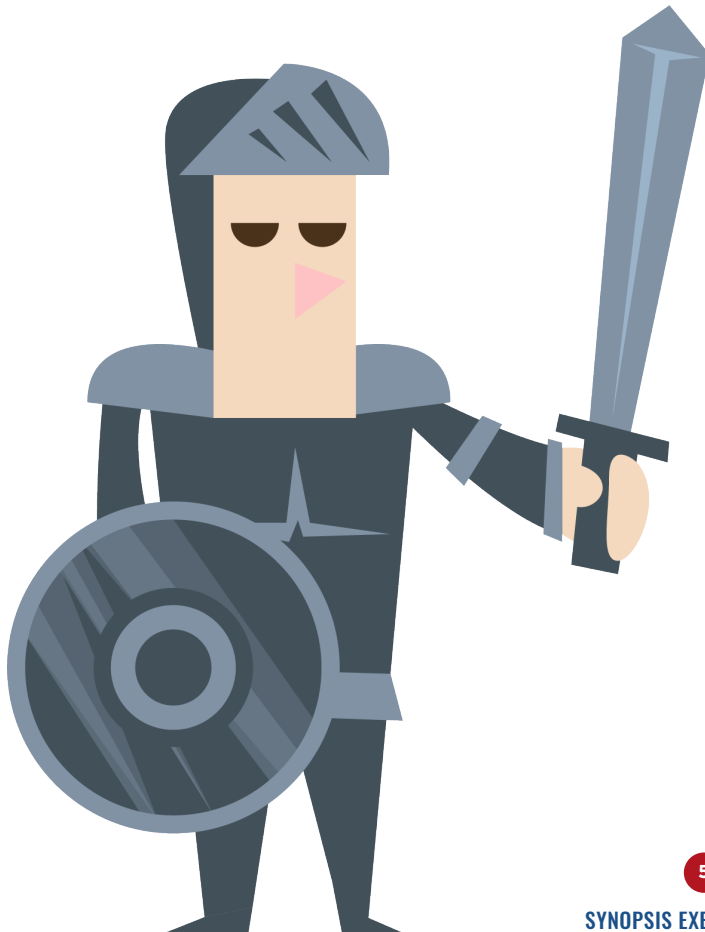


**ACTION:** Describe your inciting incident in 1 sentence.



## THE ESCALATION

This includes how your protagonist first reacts to the inciting incident, the obstacles that they encounter in pursuit of their goal and how they overcome them. These obstacles typically grow larger and more daunting the further along the protagonist gets (think of Romeo choosing to woo Juliet despite their family's conflict, which results in his duel with Tybalt, which results in his banishment, etc).



**ACTION:** Describe the escalation in one sentence

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## THE FINAL CRISIS

This is the climax of your story. If it was a video game, it'd be the final boss battle. This is the moment where everything hits the fan and your protagonist is forced to face their biggest obstacle, likely by utilizing traits, information or skills learned over the course of their journey. This is the moment where they truly prove themselves in the face of adversity, and change the course of their lives, for good or ill, forever.



**ACTION:** Describe the final crisis in one sentence.

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## THE RESOLUTION

Did they win? Did they accomplish their goal? How has the experience/journey changed your protagonist and their world? In structural terms, this is your denouement, or falling action. Your story ends and a new norm is established.



**ACTION:** Describe the resolution in one sentence.

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This may all sound daunting to try and pack into 4-5 sentences, but I swear - it's possible. You've already started with 5 sentences!



Here's a roadmap that I often find helpful:

## SENTENCE 1

INTRODUCTION OF THE PROTAGONIST, THE NORMAL WORLD  
AND THE INCITING INCIDENT.

## SENTENCES 2 AND 3

THE ESCALATION.

## SENTENCE 4 (AND 5, IF NECESSARY)

THE FINAL CRISIS AND RESOLUTION.

Example:

MacBeth, a well-regarded general in war-torn Scotland, encounters a trio of weird women who lay a prophecy upon him that he will not only rise to be Thane of Cawdor, but also King of Scotland. Emboldened by this news and the unlikely naming of him as Thane, MacBeth plots with his wife to murder Duncan, the King of Scotland as he sleeps within their home. MacBeth's ill-gotten throne fuels his paranoid mind, leading him to have killed any who stand as potential threats to his position - including his best friend, Banquo. MacBeth's murderous misdeeds lead to a military uprising and a final duel between he and MacDuff, the one man fortune foretells as capable of defeating MacBeth. Defeat him MacDuff does, beheading MacBeth and bestowing the crown on the rightful king of Scotland, Duncan's son, Malcolm.

Obviously, packing five acts of Shakespeare into five sentences means leaving quite a bit out - but we've focused in on the main arc of our protagonist (see, they're not always heros) and introduced him, his inciting incident, the escalation of his obstacles, his final crisis and the resolution of his arc - all in a tight package. Even this could use some polish and likely some greater specificity in regards to the obstacles in the escalation, however it is hopefully useful in giving a general sense of the shape and substance of a synopsis that utilizes this format.

## NOW - GO FORTH...

Identify the five essential elements of your protagonist and their story and bring them all together in that clear, concise paragraph that leaves us knowing exactly what your story is.

You've got this.



**ACTION:** Put together your 4-5 sentence synopsis using your actions from earlier and incorporating my recommended structure.

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Now that you have your synopsis you can continue to refine and test it. Try a slightly different version on each application or submission you send. Does any one in particular seem to resonate? If you find a version that's a home run then stick with it! Until then, always be testing.

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