

# SYNOPSIS CHEAT SHEET

A *synopsis* is a piece of text that, unlike a blurb, summarises the main points of a novel's plot. It is a *selling* document that usually accompanies a query letter and sample chapters. The target audience is an editor at a publishing company or a literary agent. It is a form of business-to-business (B2B) copywriting.

**What Do Editors & Agents Want?** – They want to find novels that readers will buy. And we know that genre readers are looking for something *the same only different*. Editors and agents might also tell you that they are looking for a writer who has discovered their own unique voice, though this is the cherry on the cake.

**Sell the Sizzle and the Steak** – In a synopsis, you should include major plot twists and the ending of your story. You don't tease publishing professionals in the way that you do readers in a blurb. You need to *demonstrate* that you have a complete plot with an effective climax and resolution.

**Separate Character Profiles?** – Include these only if a company's submission guidelines ask for them. The only other time you'd include them is if your book has a large cast with subsets of characters being central players in significant subplots – in an epic fantasy, for example. Or if you are trying to sell a series – see *Writing a Series* (2024) for more on this.

**Synopsis Structure** – I would advise summarising your story in accordance with three-act structure (or five-act, if that is your preference). The *beginning* (Act I) is typically the first 25% of your story, the *middle* (Act II) is around 50%, and the *end* (Act III), is roughly the final 25%. It's helpful to think of the long middle section as being separated into two by the *midpoint*. In some stories, beginning, middle and end are each closer to being 1/3 of the total length.



**ACT I = Setup** – This introduces your protagonist, the story world, and the inciting incident that upsets the equilibrium of the protagonist's life. Setup is complete when the protagonist decides to take action and chooses a story goal.

**ACT II: Part 1 = A Strange New World** – Here the protagonist does the obvious things that anyone would do in their situation. All the easy options. It also answers questions like, 'Why doesn't she just go to the police?' We also learn more about the 'world' where the events of the story take place – it's rules, hierarchy of characters, dangers, etc. – and how these relate to the main characters abilities and fears. Are they an ordinary person in an extraordinary world or an extraordinary person in an ordinary world? A relationship with a co-protagonist often begins here. And the protagonist takes steps to try and achieve their story goal.

**Midpoint = Discovery or Revelation** – The protagonist learns something that spins the story off in a new direction. Often they have to reassess their beliefs or rethink their options. Sometimes the nature of their story goal changes. We also see that their predicament is more complicated than previously assumed.

**Act II: Part 2 = Things Get Serious & Personal** – The second part of Act II builds towards a *crisis* or 'darkest hour' that ends the act. The protagonist's relationship with the co-protagonist often develops so that the co-protagonist's well-being and happiness become important to the protagonist – this raises the stakes as there is more at risk. In this quarter, the *antagonist* is more active and moves closer to achieving their story goal.

**Act III = Climax & Resolution** – Act II ends with a crisis and Act III shows how the protagonist deals with it. It also ties up any other loose ends, including what happens to the protagonist's relationship with the co-protagonist.



If you want more information on three act structure – and how to use eight sequences to break a plot into more manageable sections, check out *Plot Basics* (2017). If you are writing a story with a character development arc, see also the free guide *Plotting the Flawed Hero Story* (2017) at [paultomlinson.org/how-to](http://paultomlinson.org/how-to)

**Synopsis Length** – How long should a synopsis be? There is no standard length – they can range from two pages to ten pages. Always check a publisher or agent’s submission guidelines to see if they have a preferred length. Usually, shorter is better.

**Format** – Synopses are usually single-spaced with at least a one-inch margin all around. Again, check the submission guidelines.

**Further Reading** – For more information on writing a synopsis, I can recommend *Write a Great Synopsis: An Expert Guide* (2011) by Nicola Morgan. If you want more advice on writing a synopsis for a romance novel, Kate Walker’s *12 Point Guide to Writing a Romance* (2004) and Phyllis Taylor Pianka’s *How to Write Romances* (1998) both contain helpful information.



This document is based on Chapter 15 of the book *Blurbs & Book Descriptions* (2025) which contains more details of all the elements mentioned above.

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