



***DA VINCI INTERNATIONAL  
FILM ACADEMY***



***HOW TO WRITE A SYNOPSIS  
ADVANCE MODULE***

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## What Is a Synopsis?

The first question you have to ask yourself when wondering how to write a synopsis for a movie is “what kind?”

In this lesson we’re going to focus on the two most popular reasons for writing a film synopsis:

- ◆ To use as a selling tool after writing the script
- ◆ To nail the story before writing the script

Whatever your motivation for writing a synopsis, the basic skill required for both is the same: The ability to tell an exciting, coherent story in under 400 words.

We’re also going to show you a synopsis format example, so you can see exactly what one looks like, but let’s start with the most common reason for writing a plot synopsis: **as a marketing tool.**

### Part 1: How to Write a Synopsis as a Selling Tool

A screenplay synopsis is simply a breakdown of its core story. Its primary function is as a selling tool to aid the writer in the marketing of their script.

This kind of synopsis should fit on one page (or less) and, for this reason, is sometimes called a “one-pager.”

A script synopsis/one-page is either sent along with a query letter to a manager, exec, producer, etc. or left behind after a meeting.

A writer’s hope is that after the industry contact reads it, he/she will like the story enough to request the whole script.

### What is a Synopsis of a Movie Compared to a Treatment?

The main difference between a movie synopsis and a treatment is that a synopsis is only one page in length. A treatment, on the other hand, is

usually around 5 to 10 pages. Both can be used as selling tools. However, a synopsis is usually sent at the beginning of any communication and a treatment further down the line.

### **What Goes Into a Movie Synopsis (As a Selling Tool)?**

If there's one goal that aspiring screenwriters share, it's getting a screenplay read by "the right people," i.e. industry people. But one of the most overlooked devices when pitching a screenplay is a tightly written film synopsis that sells the core concept and story.

Learning how to write a synopsis for a movie is just as important, in many ways, as writing the actual script itself.

**Here are the key elements that go into a synopsis format:**

- ◆ Script logline
- ◆ Synopsis of core story
- ◆ Contact details

Let's take a look at each in turn.

### **How to Write a Film Synopsis: The Logline**

Technically, your logline can also go in your query letter. But it can be a good idea to include it at the top of your one-page movie synopsis also. Knowing how to pitch a film script means having a clear understanding of the core story, and how to communicate the most important element of your pitch the big idea.

Putting it into written form as a plot synopsis means first learning how to write a logline. Just like the synopsis sells the screenplay, the logline sells the synopsis.

A good logline explicitly tells us what the story is about, and what our protagonist is up against, in two sentences.

### **For example:**

After getting in a car accident, a woman is held in a shelter with two men who claim the outside world is affected by a widespread chemical attack. **(10 Cloverfield Lane)**

If the idea is good, the logline for that story will trigger the reader's imagination and make them want to read the synopsis.

### **How to Write a Synopsis: The Core Story**

The best way to think of a movie synopsis is as a short story version of your script. It is simply your script's main plot written and condensed down to a single page. Its focus is the script's core conflict: what the protagonist struggles to achieve and what's at stake if they don't achieve it.

Overall, keep the habits you've learned from screenwriting at the forefront of your mind when writing a film synopsis.

- ◆ Use strong visuals.
- ◆ Write in the present tense.
- ◆ Write what we can see (apart from a couple of exceptions if needed.)
- ◆ Let your writer's "voice" shine through in the synopsis.

A screenplay needs to be brisk and always moving the plot forward. The same applies to a screenplay synopsis, but with even more efficiency.

Your talent lies in your choice of effective words that tell the story in an exciting and efficient manner. This means forgoing subplots, minor characters and anything that's superfluous to your protagonist's struggle. Too often writers make the mistake of including too much details and things that are not important to the story. This is because we feel that by giving context around everything in the story, we're increasing the odds of the reader getting more out of it.

**This is a mistake.** We're cheating the reader of the thrill of discovering their own immediate connection with the story. Don't lose your reader by spoon-feeding them every little detail and telling them how they're supposed to think.

Get right into a very important scene and circumstance that quickly moves the story and give us a very clear and clever example of your protagonist's character. Then continue the plot synopsis by hitting only the pivotal turning points and events that define and drive the story.

### **Highlight the Protagonist's Arc in the Plot Synopsis**

Even though you'll be writing an abbreviated overview of your screenplay, it can help to take the time to spell out the protagonist's emotional growth. It's one of the very few times you can pull out of the linear narrative and give commentary.

It's a way of taking pause to establish personal turning points for your character. For example:

**“She's finally accepted the truth of her marriage, but instead of grieving, she gives in to a primal need for vengeance.”**

Or:

**“It was at this moment he knew his ultimate downfall was unavoidable, and being a man with nothing to lose would finally shake his enemies to the core.”**

Taking the time to highlight those moments where the character evolves makes them human. You can then get right back into the story beats, outlining only the plot's most important events and turning points.

Choose only the critical moments in the script where your protagonist experiences an intense turning point: an ultimatum, a

revelation, a decision. This will pull the reader into the story more as they read scenes that reveal his or her character.

### **Highlight the Genre in the Movie Synopsis**

Make sure your plot synopsis conveys the genre and tone of the script itself. Give the reader a feel for the type of movie you've written. This is your calling card for the script, so it needs to excite, thrill, move or shocks just like the script itself.

If it's a comedy, then the writing style should be humorous, and the situations you describe should be painful and hilarious at the same time.

If it's a horror, then the writing style should be evocative of a scene in a horror movie and induce anguish and fear in the reader. You get the picture.

### **Movie Synopsis Practical Exercises**

Write ten one-page synopses of your ten favourite films. This is an invaluable exercise in learning how to write a synopsis.

Another good exercise is to imagine you only have one minute to pitch your favourite director who's interested in the script.

What moments from the story would you use to try and convince them they should read the script? What scenes would you describe to ignite their interest? Your answers to these kinds of questions are what should probably go in the synopsis.

## Synopsis Format and Contact Details

There are no hard and fast rules here. As with the actual screenplay, try not to sweat the small stuff when it comes to presentation and synopsis format.

No one really cares whether you use single or double spacing or 11-point Helvetica versus 12-point Arial, or if your contact details are at the top or bottom of the page.

That said, while there are no “rules” as such, here are a few pointers.

### A Few Do's

- ◆ Always include the name of your script, who it's written by and the fact this is a synopsis. (It's best at the top.) You don't want the reader to love the story but then have no way to contact you.
- ◆ Include other optional information such as the script's genre. This can go alongside your contact details, either at the top or bottom of the synopsis.
- ◆ It's probably best to keep things as clean and simple as possible. This means avoiding Courier font, other fancy fonts or images of any kind.

### Movie Synopsis Format

Some people say you should break your plot synopsis down into three paragraphs, one for each act. Others insist it should be four, while others recommend five.

Again, there aren't any set in stone rules when it comes to writing a film synopsis. If you manage to condense your story down into three paragraphs that's fine. If it's four or five, that's fine also.

## Part 2. How to Write a Synopsis as a Story Tool

The second function of a movie synopsis involves condensing your story down to a page before starting on the script. Or, early in the process of writing it as you attempt to tighten up the story.

### **What Is a Synopsis of a Movie Compared to an Outline?**

Again, a movie synopsis is not to be confused with a treatment or a script outline. An outline is usually a longer, scene-by-scene and/or beat-by-beat breakdown of the story.

Unlike synopsis and treatments, they are only really written during the pre-script stage and don't usually go further than the writer's hard drive.

### **What Goes Into a Movie Synopsis (As a Story Tool)?**

Pretty much everything that goes into the movie synopsis as already described. The only difference is you don't have to include the logline or worry about synopsis format. It's purely a writing exercise for your eyes only.

### **How to Write a Synopsis: Conclusion**

Now that you know how to write a synopsis for a movie, it's time to put in the work.

Spend time writing synopsis of your favourite films first. Pick films similar to the one you're writing or have written and learn how important it is to be able to tell a compelling story in under 400 words.

Then apply the technique to your own story. Write and rewrite your movie synopsis until it's where you want it to be. Then get feedback on it and make changes so it's even better. And whatever you do, make sure it's been proofread by someone before sending it out. Good luck!

**Homework:** Write a synopsis of an idea for a short film that you would like to produce with your class. When it's done please email it to your lecturer or bring to your next class.