



THE NEW ZEALAND  
SOCIETY OF AUTHORS  
(PEN NEW ZEALAND INC) TE PUNI KAITIHI O AOTEAROA

## Guide to writing a synopsis for fiction

### What is a synopsis?

A synopsis is a distillation, or the essence, of your manuscript. And if it is a distillation that means it's brief. What you're trying to sell is that you are a professional writer who knows what they're doing as well as being able to tell a good story. It will also show that you have the necessary technical skills to produce a viable premise, a marketable hook, a believable plot and well-developed characters.

The synopsis is not a tool to sell your writing style and brilliant description. Think of it as an extended blurb for your book (In fact, the synopsis is often used by the publisher's publicity department in writing this). Write it as though you're trying to entice a book shop browser to buy the book and read it. Below is an example blurb from a memoir although it could equally apply to a romance or a novel.

“When Laura Fraser’s husband leaves her for his high school sweetheart, she takes off, on impulse, for the Italian Island of Ischia, to nurse her shattered ego. There she meets M., an aesthetics professor from Paris with an oversized love of life. What they both assume will be a casual vacation tryst turns into a passionate, transatlantic love affair, as they rendezvous in Marrakech, Lago Maggiore, Stromboli, London, and San Francisco – each encounter a delirious immersion into place (sumptuous food and wine, dazzling scenery, lush gardens, and vibrant streetscapes) and into each other. And each experience also becomes for Laura another step toward a fully recovered sense of her emotional self.” (*The Italian Affair* by Laura Fraser, Pantheon Books, New York.)

### How long should it be?

Most editors prefer a synopsis to be either a single page of about 300 words, or two pages of about 600 words, double spaced. It should include only the major plot twists and turns.

### ***Some points you should consider when preparing a synopsis:***

#### **1. Who is it for?**

In most cases the commissioning editor uses a synopsis to decide whether or not he or she wants to see the whole manuscript. Once the manuscript is accepted for publication, the publishers' marketing and promotional people will use the synopsis as a basis for the book cover blurb. It's your job to keep this synopsis as tight and focused as you can.

#### **2. What to leave out**

Because the synopsis must be interesting and supply only necessary information, deciding what to cut out can be the hardest part.

Leave out description. What lets many beginning authors down is the fact that they put too much description (scene as well as character) in a synopsis that is not integral to the basic plot. This scene-setting is not as important as showing the editor that you know exactly what your book is about and that you can construct an engaging plot.

Leave out empty questions. “*Will James save the day?*”, “*Is Mary going to win the race?*”, “*Will David survive the ordeal?*”

Don't speak directly to the reader. Don't write, “*The conflict here is about..*” or “*What I'm trying to do here is....*” Talking directly to the reader jerks him or her out of the flow of the story.

Don't tell the reader how to feel. Don't say the story is a “*heartrending, humorous, exciting, terrifying tale of...*”. Readers prefer to be the judge of whether your story makes them feel the way you intended.

Don't go overboard. Being reasonably persuasive is okay, but try to avoid telling the editor that your mother/sister/best friend loved the book and that they think you are the next John Grisham or J.K. Rowling. The synopsis and the work have to speak for themselves and that is what will ultimately 'sell' the editor.

### 3. What must be in it

A synopsis consists of three equally important parts - character, internal plot points (the emotional development, shifts in perspective, new understandings) and external plot points (the bad guys, the mystery, the deep dark secret). Try to give each element equal weight in the synopsis.

You need to be objective. Don't get too bound up with some complex explanation of what you are trying to achieve with the book. The synopsis needs to be short and snappy. It needs to contain:

1. What the book is about, the summarising sentences or blurb. Write in one sentence exactly what your book is about – a sentence that describes the bare bones of the book, the premise. The premise of the book is the starting point through which the other elements interact to make a coherent plot.  
*Example – What if a man driving home from work hits and kills a hitchhiker?* The nucleus of nearly every book can be traced to a provocative, well-answered "what if".
2. What happens at the beginning, the starting point. Start with "*As the book opens...*" or "*The story starts when...*" and then tell your story. Imagine relating it to a friend across the dining room table. You don't want to be boring or be there all night, so it has to be brief – just the bare bones.
3. What happens in the middle
  - The major plot points or twists
  - What the main characters want, what are their goals
  - What problems each character is trying to solve
  - What escalating obstacles, both external and internal, prevent them from getting what they want.
4. What happens at the end, how the problems are resolved, what attitudes and perceptions have changed, what understandings have been reached, or not, depending on the book.

### 4. Writing the synopsis

List the major plot points. (Some writers use three major points, some use five and some even use seven). Plot points are places where the story changes and takes a different direction. Be sure they tie in with the characters' goals and show the conflict of those goals. Be concise. Mention sub-plots only as they affect the main plot. After you've identified the major points, fill in with plot-based transitions to get you from one turning point to the next. These should mirror the flow of the story.

Pacing is important. Details and descriptions slow things down, while action propels them forward. Use short paragraphs and punchy sentences. Don't get bogged down with describing what happens: it is more important to say why it happens, or how it affects the main characters. If you have to mention secondary characters refer to them by their role, for example: (main character's) 'wife', 'daughter' and so on. Leave out minor characters and scenes.

When describing action avoid, "He did this, so he did that, and then they left". You need to make it flow. For example:

When James tries to reason with Wiremu Stokes, the gang leader grows angry, grabs James by the throat and pushes him up against the wall. When he finally lets him go, James, shaken, staggers off as Wiremu guns his car down the road giving James the finger as he passes.

When writing the synopsis each sentence should help prove that this is a compelling story. If it doesn't, delete it, even if that means missing out a couple of chapters. Your synopsis will succeed or fail on its interest value, not its comprehensiveness.

No matter what tense your book was written in, the synopsis is always written in present tense (*James goes to prison, Julie leaves her husband*). This reminds the editor that he or she is reading a condensed version of something larger and more interesting.

Write your synopsis in the same format you would use for your manuscript. Use black type, double-spaced on clean white paper. Set your margins for one inch (about 2.5 cms) around ALL sides of the text. Don't right-justify your text – the lines on the right-hand side of the page should be ragged, for ease of reading. Use a standard font, like Garamond, Palatino or Times New Roman.

Finally, write one sentence describing your ending. Write what happens at the climax of your book. You want action from your main characters here.

After the assailant runs off Wiremu turns to James and jerks his chin up with the hint of a grin. James feels the knots between his shoulder blades untangle. He knows it's over.

This is not necessarily the end of the story but it is the end of the essential action. It's where the resolution comes. This is where you stop.