



The Synopsis.

*the whole story,
on one page.*

A working field guide to the novel synopsis: the one-page rule of thumb, what to keep and what to cut, how to give away the ending and track the character's arc, the present-tense voice that reads like the book without performing it, the mistakes that make a synopsis unreadable, and a printable planner to build your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft the page.

A synopsis is the one document in a submission that hides nothing. The query letter teases, the sample pages seduce, and then the synopsis lays the entire novel out flat, opening to ending, so an agent or editor can see whether the story actually holds together. It is short, it is unglamorous, and it is where more manuscripts stall than at any other gate. This guide is about making yours the kind that opens the door.

There is no single author to credit here. What follows distills the standard submission practice that agents and editors work by, as it operates in publishing today: how long the page runs, what goes in and what gets cut, how to handle the ending and the arc, and where synopses reliably fail. A running example, an invented novel called **Under the Varnish**, is built one movement at a time so you can watch a real synopsis assemble. The four-movement shape at the center of this guide also lives as a free fill-in planner on our site, so you can draft yours directly against it.

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What a synopsis is.

the query withholds. the synopsis reveals, ending and all.

A synopsis is a one-to-two-page, present-tense summary of your entire novel, from the opening situation to the final image, written so a reader can grasp the whole shape of the story without touching the manuscript. It is not a blurb, not a teaser, and not the back-cover copy that stops at the exciting part. It is the diagram of the machine, drawn plainly enough that a professional can tell at a glance whether the machine runs.

It exists to prove three things at once. That the **plot holds together**, each event causing the next with no gap you had to paper over. That the **character arc completes**, the protagonist changed by the end rather than merely present for it. And that the **climax pays off** what the premise set up. Where the query letter is built to withhold, the synopsis is built to disclose, and that includes the ending. Its whole purpose is to answer the question the query was allowed to dodge.

Treat it as a confidential professional document, not marketing copy. No one prints a synopsis on a jacket. It travels between you and the handful of people deciding whether to ask for the book, and they are reading it for structural soundness, not for suspense. The moment you start protecting a twist from your own agent, you have mistaken the form for advertising.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A synopsis is a one-page, present-tense summary of the whole novel, ending included, that proves the plot coheres, the protagonist changes, and the climax pays off, written for a reader deciding whether to ask for the manuscript.

Why writers dread it.

it strips the voice and tests the skeleton. that is the point.

Most writers would rather do almost anything than write the synopsis, and the reason is honest. It removes everything you are proud of. The voice, the scenes you rewrote forty times, the atmosphere, the lines that made a reader gasp: all of it is stripped away, and what remains is the bare sequence of what happens and why. It can feel like being asked to describe a cathedral by listing the stones.

That stripping is not a cruelty of the form. It is the form's entire function. Prose can carry a weak structure a long way on charm, and the synopsis exists precisely to remove the charm and see whether the skeleton stands on its own. An agent who loves your pages still needs to know the story underneath them works, and the fastest way to find out is to read it with the varnish scraped off.

WHAT THE DREAD IS TELLING YOU

- If a subplot is impossible to summarize, it may not be load-bearing. Consider whether the novel misses it.
- If the arc vanishes the moment the scenes do, the change was living in the prose, not in the plot.
- If the climax feels unearned in summary, the setup is thin. The page is reporting a real problem, not creating one.

So the difficulty is diagnostic. A synopsis that fights you is often a book telling you where it is soft, and more than one writer has found a missing motivation or an unearned turn on a single page of summary. A clean synopsis, by the same logic, is evidence to an agent that the manuscript behind it is under control.

What the reader checks.

an agent is not reading for pleasure here. they are inspecting the engine.

Know who is on the other side of the page. A synopsis is usually read by an agent or an acquiring editor, after the query has earned their attention and often alongside the first pages. They are not reading it the way a fan reads a novel. They are reading it the way an engineer reads a schematic, running a short and unsentimental checklist, and most of the craft in this guide is about answering that checklist before it is asked.

WHAT THE READER IS CHECKING

- Does the plot hold together, cause following cause, with no gap that only the finished prose could hide?
- Does the protagonist change, or do things merely happen to a person who ends where they began?
- Does the climax pay off the promise the opening made, or arrive from somewhere the setup never earned?
- Can you land an ending? Can you state it plainly, own it, and make it feel inevitable rather than convenient?
- Is the whole thing controlled enough that the manuscript behind it can be trusted with an agent's time?

Every rule that follows serves that list. Present tense and a small named cast keep the schematic legible. Cutting the subplots that change nothing keeps the causal line visible. Telling the ending answers the one question they most need answered. When a synopsis feels flat to write, it is usually because one of these checks is coming back no, and the honest move is to fix the story, not to dress up the page.

The whole story on one page.

roughly one paragraph per act. about five hundred words in all.

A one-page synopsis has a shape you can see from across the room: about one paragraph per act, opening to ending, near five hundred words in total. Give the climax and its fallout the most room, because landing the ending is what the reader most wants to watch you do. Across the craft pages that follow, we build one synopsis for an invented novel, a single movement at a time, until the whole page stands assembled.

THE FIRST HALF

01	Setup and inciting incident	~120 WDS
02	Escalation to the midpoint	~120 WDS

THE SECOND HALF

03	Collapse and low point	~110 WDS
04	Climax and resolution	~150 WDS

The counts assume a single page. If an agent asks for two, widen each movement rather than bolting on a fifth; the four-movement shape holds at any length. Prepare the one-page version first regardless. It is the hard one, and everything longer is an expansion of it.

UNDER THE VARNISH • ACT 1

When her mother dies, CLARE MADDEN, a London art conservator who has spent fifteen years making damaged paintings look untouched, comes home to the failing coast-road hotel she swore she would never inherit. She means to sell it inside a month and leave. Her brother DECLAN, who stayed to nurse their mother and keep the bar open, wants the same money and none of her. Clearing the estate, Clare re-varnishes the dark old landscape that has hung over the bar all her life and finds, under a century of grime, a signature that should not be there. The worthless family copy may be a lost original worth more than the hotel.

Length and the one-page rule.

guidelines win. prepare one page first.

The working standard is one page, single-spaced, around five hundred words, and most agents who ask for a synopsis without naming a length mean something close to that. Some ask for two pages, a few for more, and their submission guidelines win every single time; read them before you write a word. Anything past three pages stops being read as a synopsis and starts being skimmed as a treatment, which is a different document with a different job.

Prepare the one-page version first, even when the guidelines allow two. It is the harder one to write and the easier one to expand, and the discipline of the single page is what forces every good decision in this guide. At one page a novel gets roughly one paragraph per act, and that tight allotment is not a constraint to resent. It is the tool that reveals which parts of your story are actually structural and which were only ever texture.

UNDER THE VARNISH • ACT 2A

Clare tells no one and begins to authenticate the painting in secret, the one thing she knows how to do. A discreet dealer, VICTOR SHAW, offers to buy it privately, no questions about where it came from, for enough to clear the debt and free them both. But the paper trail stops in 1945, at her grandfather, a border customs officer, and a train of confiscated crates that never reached their owners. At the midpoint Clare finds her mother's hidden file: ROSE knew the truth for decades, turned down every buyer, and still could not give the painting back. It was stolen. Selling it means selling the lie her mother chose to keep.

What to cut.

a subplot survives only if it changes the main plot.

The one-paragraph-per-act budget makes cutting unavoidable, and the good news is that the page tells you exactly what to remove. You are not deciding what you love. You are deciding what the main story cannot be told without. Everything that fails that test, however beautifully written, belongs in the manuscript and not on this page.

WHAT SURVIVES THE CUT

- A subplot survives only if it changes the main plot. If the ending reads the same without it, it goes.
- A secondary character earns a name only if the summary breaks without them. Everyone else is a role: her brother, a rival, the detective's boss.
- A scene earns a clause only if it is a turning point. A chapter that took a month to write becomes one clause, or nothing at all.

Apply the tests without mercy and the causal line comes clear. The example below has already been cut hard: a romance thread, a second sibling, and a long stretch of hotel-renovation detail are all gone, because none of them changes what Clare finally decides. What is left is only the spine that carries the ending.

UNDER THE VARNISH • ACT 2B

Clare traces the rightful heir to MIRIAM WEISS, an elderly woman two towns over whose family the grandfather robbed and whose name is inked on the back of the canvas. Telling her would forfeit the money, expose the family, and hand Declan a bankruptcy he did nothing to cause. Declan, learning what she has hidden, accuses her of doing what she always does: stripping away whatever is inconvenient and calling it repair. Victor raises his offer and sets a deadline. Cornered, Clare signs the private sale and hates herself for it. That night she lifts a brush to varnish over the signature again, to make the theft invisible one more time.

Tell the ending.

you must give it away. this is not a tease.

Tell the ending. This is the rule writers most want to break and the one that most reliably sinks a synopsis when they do. Every agent who asks for one is asking specifically to see whether you can land the plane, and a closing line like “and then she must make the hardest choice of her life” is a refusal to answer that question. State what the protagonist does at the climax, what it costs them, and how things stand afterward. If there is a twist, reveal it. If the book is a mystery, name the culprit and show how the detective gets there.

Withholding does not read as intriguing. It reads as coyness, or worse, as a signal that the ending is weak and you know it. Remember that this is a confidential professional document, not jacket copy; the reader is not a customer to be enticed but a colleague deciding whether to invest. The example’s ending is told in full below, climax and resolution and final image, with nothing held back.

UNDER THE VARNISH • ACT 3, THE ENDING TOLD

Her hand stops. Clare sees that her craft and her whole life have run the same evasion her mother’s did, and that true restoration does not hide the break, it shows it. At the climax she tears up Victor’s contract, drives the painting to Miriam Weiss, and gives it back, with the file, the signature, and the truth about her grandfather intact. Miriam, who assumed everything was lost, weeps, and insists Clare keep a small unsigned study that always travelled with it, so the two families are joined rather than squared. The sale collapses, and with it the easy escape. Clare stays. She and Declan put the hotel into slow, honest repair, its debt real and its walls finally clear of the lie. In the last image she rehangs the cleaned, empty frame over the bar and leaves it empty, on purpose.

The character arc.

track the change, not just the events. major names in CAPS on first mention.

Running alongside the plot, the synopsis has to show the internal arc: who the protagonist is at the start, what belief or wound governs them, and how the events of the book change that by the end. It rarely needs more than a sentence at the opening, a clause at the midpoint, and a sentence at the climax, threaded through the plot rather than pulled out into a paragraph of its own. It is also the element most often missing, because writers summarizing events forget to summarize the person.

A synopsis where things simply happen to a protagonist who never changes reads as a plot without a story, and that is precisely the note it will earn. Keep the named cast small so the arc stays visible: capitalize major characters on first mention, a convention that helps the reader track who matters, and leave everyone else in lowercase roles. The example's arc is tracked in three touches below, each one riding a plot beat rather than pausing it.

UNDER THE VARNISH • THE ARC IN THREE TOUCHES

Open. *Clare believes damage is survived by covering it over: the conservator who makes every break invisible, the daughter who moved away and stayed away.*

Midpoint. *She learns her mother lived by the same rule, hiding a stolen painting for decades, and the belief she has never questioned finally has a name.*

Climax. *She rejects it. Restoration means revealing the break, so she gives the painting, and the truth, back, and loses the money that would have let her run.*

Present tense and voice.

third person, present tense, a flavor of the book without the purple.

Write the synopsis in present tense and third person, regardless of the novel's own tense and point of view. A first-person past-tense literary novel still gets a third-person present-tense synopsis, because the form is a convention agents expect and present tense keeps the summary moving. Cut what does not belong to a schematic: no dialogue, no rhetorical questions to the reader, no teasers or cliffhangers, no chapter numbers. The synopsis narrates the story; it does not perform it.

Voice still matters, but at a whisper. Aim for plain, confident prose that carries a hint of the book's tone, wry or grave or tender, without trying to reproduce it at length. Purple summary is a common tell, because the reader knows a synopsis cannot deliver on atmosphere and reads the attempt as a writer hiding thin structure behind mood. The pages are where you prove voice. The synopsis is where you prove the story holds.

UNDER THE VARNISH • VOICE, BEFORE AND AFTER

Overwrought, past tense: "Clare had always feared coming home, and as the rain lashed the shuttered old hotel, she wondered whether she could ever truly escape the long shadow of her family."

On the page, present and plain: "Clare comes home to sell the hotel and leave. She does not expect to find, under the varnish of a painting she has ignored all her life, a signature."

Make it read like a story.

causality is the whole craft. and so, or but, never and then.

The line between a plot summary and a synopsis is causation. A summary lists events in order; a synopsis shows why each one forces the next. The practical fix is small and powerful: after every turning point, name its consequence, not just what happens but what it makes the protagonist decide to do. Then cut any event that produces no consequence, because if nothing follows from it, the reader needs it even less than you do.

A quick test comes from screenwriting rooms. If the beats of your synopsis are joined by “and then,” you have a list; if they are joined by “and so” or “but,” you have a story. When you finish, read the page aloud to someone who has not read the book and ask them to tell it back. If their version has a hole, so does the synopsis, and quite possibly so does the manuscript.

UNDER THE VARNISH • AND THEN vs AND SO

And then: Clare finds the signature. Then Victor offers to buy it. Then she finds her mother’s file. Then she signs the sale.

And so, but: Clare finds the signature, so she authenticates it in secret, but the trail ends at her grandfather’s theft, so selling it means burying a crime, and that is the choice the book finally forces her to make.

Seven ways a synopsis goes wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. Hiding the ending.** The page trails off into “the hardest choice of her life” and answers nothing. Fix: spoil the climax and the resolution outright; that reveal is the whole reason the synopsis was requested.
- **2. The “and then” list.** A flat run of events with no causation, no stakes, no reason one leads to the next. Fix: put the consequence after every turning point and cut any event that produces none.
- **3. Too many named characters.** A dozen capitalized names on a single page that no reader can keep straight. Fix: name only the few the story cannot be told without; everyone else becomes a role.
- **4. Tense drift.** The summary slips into past tense, or never leaves it. Fix: write in present tense throughout, then do a final pass hunting stray past-tense verbs.
- **5. Chapter by chapter.** A summary that marches through the book’s chapters instead of its structure. Fix: summarize by turning point, not by table of contents; many chapters collapse into one clause.
- **6. No arc, only plot.** Events happen to a protagonist who ends exactly where they began. Fix: track the inner change at the opening, the midpoint, and the climax, threaded through the events.
- **7. Running long into a treatment.** Three, four, five pages of mounting detail. Fix: cut to one page first; past three pages it stops being read as a synopsis and starts being skimmed.

THE READ-IT-BACK TEST

Read the finished synopsis to someone who has not read the book and have them tell it back. If their retelling has a hole, the synopsis has one, and quite possibly the manuscript does too. That is the document doing its real job: it finds the soft spot before an agent does.

Your synopsis planner.

print this page. logline first, then the four movements.

LOGLINE (ONE SENTENCE)

RESOLUTION + FINAL IMAGE

ACT 1 - SETUP + INCITING INCIDENT

PROTAGONIST ARC (START TO END)

ACT 2A - ESCALATION TO MIDPOINT

WHICH SUBPLOTS EARN A LINE

ACT 2B - COLLAPSE + LOW POINT

MAJOR NAMES (CAPS ON FIRST USE)

ACT 3 - CLIMAX (SPOIL IT)

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

A synopsis is the plot skeleton written out in prose, so the fastest way to draft one is to have the skeleton already in hand. Map your novel's turning points as a live, fill-in outline with our free **Three-Act** guide, where every beat has a text box that saves as you type. Build the skeleton there, follow the four movements straight down the page, and the synopsis very nearly writes itself.

onemoredraft.com/guides/three-act

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor that is free to use, professional-grade export for submission, story tools for characters, beats, and structure, and Quill, your resident story editor, for when you want a second pair of eyes on the page. There is a free desktop app for Windows, too.

MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- How to Write a Query Letter · the synopsis's companion in every submission
- How to Outline a Novel · build the skeleton before you summarize it
- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat story standard
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

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