

# Conquering the Dreaded Synopsis: A Series of Ten Lectures

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## ***Lecture Six: Identifying Plot Points***

After grabbing an editor’s interest with a strong opening, your next task in the short synopsis is to accurately—and entertainingly—summarize your 400-page magnum opus in the roughly two and half pages you have left. No problem right? After writing 400 pages, two and a half should be a piece of cake.

Unfortunately, this is where many synopses fail. The writer succumbs to “laundry list” syndrome, cramming in one sentence for every scene of the novel, regardless of importance. This overwhelming level of detail suffocates voice and leaves the editor reeling. Or, the studious writer goes off on tangents, describing secondary characters or minor research elements that aren’t crucial to understanding the core story. Or, the author may have determined the right level of detail, but then transitions so roughly that the synopsis seems to leap randomly from point to point, lacking clear logic flow. Once again the editor becomes overwhelmed and stops reading.

Why these problems occur is simple: The poor author is trying to reduce hundreds of pages into three, and she can’t decide what to leave in or what to leave out, so she includes a bit of everything. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work.

Instead, you need to focus on the main plot points and turning points of the novel. Ignore secondary plots and characters. Forget about individual scenes. Just identify the major incidents that comprise the skeleton of your story.

Of course, this leads to the logical question, but what are the key scenes in my novel? Many of us plot organically, and it’s only after the fact that we can examine each scene of our novel to determine which ones are essential to the development of the story, and which ones we simply love. (And if you’re reading this now thinking, oh, but all of my scenes are essential to the story, only an idiot includes nonessential book scenes, refer to the “laundry list” syndrome mentioned above. Not all scenes in a novel are of equal importance. It’s a fact. Move on.)

To help identify major plot points, I've broken my first two suspense novels, *The Perfect Husband* (TPH) and *The Other Daughter* (TOD), into key plot points and turning points. Hopefully, analyzing these outlines will help you identify the main plot points in your own novel.

Some caveats: This analysis will make more sense if you've read the two books, as one point of this exercise is understanding all the stuff I leave *out* of the outline. Also, the outlines give away substantial information about the novels, which will ruin the suspense if you haven't read the books yet. I leave it to your judgment.

Finally, the reason I outlined both books is that they represent two different kinds of suspense. TPH is a classic thriller novel, whereas TOD is a mystery novel. In a thriller, we know who the bad guy is, so the suspense is derived by how you catch him. Thrillers rely heavily on action, the cat and mouse chase between protagonist and antagonist. If you have a thriller novel, you must have at least a few clever turning points where the book heads a new direction, as we will see reflected in the outline of TPH.

A mystery, on the other hand, derives its suspense from who did it. Mystery novels generally have a large cast of characters so there will be plenty of suspects. Also, they rarely have many action sequences, but instead must get out new pieces of the puzzle (new information on the crime) to keep the book moving forward. The plot points may appear subtler then, as there is less overt action. Instead, big revelations serve as major plot points, and/or turning points in the novel.

With that background, let's begin.

### **Major Plot Points: *The Perfect Husband***

*Premise:* Mysterious woman (Tess) attempts to hire an ex-mercenary (J.T.) to teach her how to protect herself and her child from homicidal ex-husband (Jim Beckett).

*Plot Point 1:* Ex-mercenary finally agrees to help damsel in distress, even though he's sworn off damsels in distress—particularly ones who won't give him their real names.

*Plot Point 2:* Homicidal ex-husband infiltrates police task force to learn status of investigation; leaves them a pointed message (dead body) that he's still interested in finding his wife and capable of using the cops to do it.

*Plot Point 3:* Ex-mercenary's sister learns woman's true identity and involves the local police to do so, possibly compromising the woman's safety. All fear Jim Beckett will head to Arizona and Tess is nowhere near ready.

*Turning Point 1:* Jim Beckett does not head to Arizona. He heads to central Massachusetts where he kills a cop and kidnaps his own daughter. Police mobilize in an even bigger way...but Jim Beckett is nowhere to be found. (I call this a turning point, because the book just fundamentally shifted. Readers have been expecting Jim to track

down Tess in Arizona, but instead he's gone after his daughter and raised the stakes in a major way.)

*Plot Point 4:* Tess returns to Massachusetts against all advice. Jim Beckett promptly attacks Tess and J.T. at the crime scene. Only J.T.'s excellent combat skills get them out alive. They are both injured...but now so is Jim Beckett.

*Turning Point 2:* Tess decides to lay a trap for her husband with herself as bait. She will wait in their old house, knowing that Beckett cannot resist the challenge of coming after her. Once and for all, it will be done. (This is another turning point because again the book has shifted. Tess is taking control, setting the stage for a showdown.)

*Resolution:* Jim Beckett comes after Tess. Killing an FBI agent first downtown, then taking out one of the rooftop snipers, he splits the protective task force, and descends upon his terrified wife. J.T. however, surprises the man from behind. Beckett winds up dead, and Samantha is found. Family reunited.

Now, anyone who has read the book knows it was more involved than this. I barely mention Marion (J.T.'s sister) though she's a key part of the novel. I don't have room. I never mention the police POV—Special Agent Quincy, Lieutenant Difford, and the rest who carry substantial scenes. I don't have room. I'm looking just at key action points from the protagonist/antagonist POV. The approach is bare bones, but it also leads to a concise logic flow. A strong, clear logic flow is extremely important. I can't emphasize that enough.

### **Major Plot Points: *The Other Daughter***

*Premise:* Melanie Stokes believes she is leading the perfect life. Twenty years ago she was abandoned at a Massachusetts hospital, drugged and with no memory. That was a long time ago, however, and she rarely thinks about it anymore. Promptly adopted by a well-respected surgeon and his wife, Melanie has grown up in the lap of luxury. She is doted upon by her parents, adored by her adopted brother, and spoiled by her godfather. At the age of twenty-nine, she feels she is probably the luckiest person in the world. Until tonight.

*Plot Point 1:* A tabloid reporter arrives at the Stokes's residence. Getting Melanie alone, he declares that he has proof that she is the daughter of a Texas serial killer, Russell Lee Holmes. Holmes was executed for the murder of six young children the same night Melanie was abandoned in the MA hospital. And one of the children Holmes allegedly killed was Melanie's adoptive parent's first daughter, Meagan. Melanie does not believe the reporter and sends him away.

*Plot Point 2:* The next day, Melanie comes home to an unpleasant surprise—an altar at the foot of her bed containing 55 votive candles spelling a single name: Meagan. In the middle rests one of Meagan's old toys. It was last seen the day she died.

*Plot Point 3:* Melanie pays a visit to the tabloid reporter, wanting to see his proof. Before Melanie can get more details, however, the tabloid reporter is shot dead. Melanie just manages to take cover, before the gunman grabs the reporter's notebooks and runs.

*Turning Point 1:* Now a witness to a homicide, Melanie ends up in protective custody. For reasons that are not clear to Melanie, the FBI are also interested in her case. Fortunately, Special Agent David Riggs agrees to pull the FBI case file on Russell Lee Holmes. To their surprise, his request for information generates a personal phone call from Quantico's leading profiler, Pierce Quincy. Quincy has recently read the file, and to his expert eye, the Meagan Stokes's murder was clearly a copycat crime—not the work of Russell Lee Holmes. Worse, he believes the likely suspects for Meagan's murder are her own family members—Harper, Patricia, and Brian Stokes. (Remember, this is a turning point because the book is now obviously headed in a different direction.)

*Plot Point 4:* Melanie and David research Meagan Stokes in earnest. They learn Meagan's murder garnered the Stokes one million dollars in life insurance. Also, Patricia and Harper Stokes were having marital problems as well; Harper liked to sleep around and Patricia retaliated with an affair of her own—with Harper's best friend and Melanie's godfather, Jamie O'Donnell. Last but not least, Melanie's brother Brian was seeing a therapist in the 1970s. He had been so mean to his little sister that he was not allowed to be alone with her. Definitely, there were a lot of people with possible motive to hurt Meagan Stokes. Quincy and David now believe Melanie may honestly be the daughter of Russell Lee Holmes. Possibly, her parents agreed to adopt her in return for Russell Lee Holmes confessing to the murder of Meagan Stokes, finally ending the police investigation. Melanie can't believe her parents would do such a thing, but she is beginning to wonder. Maybe the hired gun can tell them more...

*Plot Point 5:* Hired gun turns up dead. No clues.

*Plot Point 6:* Melanie returns home against David's advice. When she tries to question her family about the past, however, she and Harper end up in a violent argument. He slaps her, then storms away. Melanie doesn't know what to believe anymore.

*Turning Point 2:* Next morning when Melanie comes downstairs, she finds her father's business associate in his study, rifling through papers. When she confronts William, he pulls a gun and demands to know the combination for Harper's safe. In bits and pieces, Melanie learns that her father has been committing healthcare fraud—hence the FBI's interest in her; they have been investigating her father. William babbles about how little she really knows about her parents. Melanie and William end up in a struggle. The gun goes off. William falls dead. Melanie has killed a man and all she can wonder is if Russell Lee Holmes would approve.

*Plot Point 7:* David receives a call from Melanie that she's just killed William in self-defense. She will not be around for questioning, however. She's taking matters in her own hands. Good-bye. David races to the scene to find that the healthcare squad's main witness is now dead, Harper is accusing his daughter of the crime, and Patricia looks on the verge of collapse. She wants to know if anyone has told Brian yet about the shooting.

The police respond that they can't find Brian Stokes. A friend declared him missing 24-hours ago.

*Plot Point 8:* Frantic and scared, David tracks Melanie to Huntsville, Texas, the last home of Russell Lee Holmes. Melanie is trying to learn everything she can about her father and she is destroying herself bit by bit. Everything about her life is a lie. She is merely a substitute for a murdered daughter. David tells her it's not that simple yet. He believes in her. He will help her find the truth.

*Turning Point 3:* Together, they track down the midwife who had delivered Russell Lee Holmes's child. Melanie confesses to the woman that she is Russell Lee Holmes's daughter and she wants to find out what happened twenty-five years ago. The midwife, however, is stunned. Russell Lee Holmes did not have a daughter, she informs Melanie. Russell Lee Holmes had a son...

Okay, I won't give you the resolution because that ruins the whole book and frankly, I'm mean. Needless to say, this outline is running long and that's because this book is 500 pages (115,000 words) so condensing it down is even more difficult. To give you some sense of what I left out, the complete novel involves ten different POVs. We spend time with the mom, the dad, the brother, the godfather, the reporter, etc. The hero is introduced right away and has a compelling backstory. I didn't include any of that here because then I definitely couldn't cover the outline in three pages. Subplots include a shadowy figure that is sending everyone notes saying you get what you deserve. Patricia Stokes, by the way, is a recovering alcoholic. The book spends a lot of time on her complex relationship with her husband, as well as Jamie O'Donnell. Other subplots are that Melanie's brother, Brian, was kicked out of the family six months ago for declaring that he is gay. This starts to play into the police's suspicion of why someone contacted the reporter now. Oh, and Melanie's best friend Ann Margaret is relevant, and William isn't just Harper's business associate, he's also Melanie's ex-fiancé.

See, left that all out and probably confused you by putting it here. That's why I left it out. It's extraneous stuff, the meat on the bones, and for three pages, you just want BONES. Keep to a singular POV if that helps. Focus on primary scenes, nothing else.

Bottom line—we're back to KISS.

## **Conclusion**

Identifying the key plot points in your novel will enable you to properly focus your short—and long—synopsis. If you have been creating synopses that are confusing, flat, or overwhelming, look at the level of detail you are trying to include. It's always better to say a few things well, than many things badly.

Next up, we're going to look at two possible outlines to help you organize your bold hook and brilliant plot points into a nice, neat, highly marketable, package.