

Conquering the Dreaded Synopsis: A Series of Ten Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

This continues this series of ten lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."

Lecture One: The Market

Having taught classes on writing synopses over the past few years, there are two common issues all writers seem to face: One, how to keep a synopsis from sounding flat—otherwise known as how to establish *voice* in a simple three-page book report; and two, how to know which aspects of the story to include in the synopsis and which aspects of the story to leave out.

We will work on developing voice when we get to the lectures on crafting the short synopsis. Today, however, we're going to tackle the second issue: How the heck do you know which parts of your precious novel to include and which parts to leave out, since you can't cover everything in 3-10 pages?

The answer is: THE MARKET will tell you.

For today's lecture we must stop being artists. Today, we are businesspeople. We have either created a product or we have a great idea for a product. Either way, we need to sell our widget and to do that we have to stop thinking about what *we* like about it, and start thinking about what *other* people might like about it.

Let's begin by putting ourselves in an editor's shoes. These days, marketing matters. It is no accident that I sold my first suspense novel, *The Perfect Husband*, to Bantam books. They said up front that the book reminded them of Tami Hoag and Bantam knows how to sell Hoag. Their art department knows how to package her, their sales force knows how to sell her, and their editors know how to edit her. Thus, the publisher could confidently justify the sale, the same way Mattel can confidently buy a new model of Barbie. All of which my agent knew when she mailed my manuscript to them. Upon first reading my

novel, she had put herself in an editor's shoes and thought, who is going to respond to this book? She judged the market correctly when she targeted Bantam.

Now, you're not an agent. You don't get to do power lunches so how do you know who will want your book and what specifically about it they will want? Actually, you can learn a lot on the Internet alone.

1. Analyze trends

Pay a visit to Amazon.com and browse what is selling. Visit the *New York Times* website and *USA Today* to see what is making the bestseller lists. Visit the *Publishers Weekly* site—PW has a great column where they announce the latest book and movie deals, which helps you know what's hot. Medical thrillers are in. Legal thrillers are in. Serial killer books are overdone, but somehow remain a classic.

You can also learn from editors what they like or don't like by reading the tip sheets available at various publisher websites. Silhouette will tell you the cowboys, babies, and marriage of conveniences are popular. Also, military series à la Merline Lovelace and Suzanne Brockmann are vogue. If your book has any of these elements, lead with it as editors are responding to those kinds of stories.

So by examining bestseller lists and publisher websites, you can see what is popular. Then you can look at your own novel and determine what element is going to be your strongest sales hook. What else?

2. Analyze authors

Maybe you don't have a cool plot hook in your novel. I didn't for *The Perfect Husband*—serial killer books are a dime a dozen. Well, what about tone? Is your voice reminiscent of another hot author or *NYT* bestseller? Editors will pitch that to sales staff as enthusiastically as a plot hook. Everyone would love to find the next John Grisham, Nora Roberts, or Michael Crichton. If you're as dark as Sandra Brown or as light and quirky as Jayne Ann Krentz, mention it. This positions you in an editor's mind. Basically, you're helping the editor make her pitch to marketing—yes we should buy this writer; she may be the next Lisa Gardner 😊 But—word of warning here—don't go on and on about how you are the next FAMOUS AUTHOR. State it once for market positioning, then let it go. An editor will read your work and judge for herself if you are indeed FAMOUS AUTHOR material.

3. Identify target publishers and their preferences

Now you have an idea of a plot hook or writing style that may make your work attractive. Next you need to identify which publisher will be most interested in these elements. Publishers do specialize, even within romance, even within suspense. Some publishers do lighter books, Bantam is certainly known for dark romantic suspense. Avon's romance program is very different from Kensington's. Start paying attention to the

publisher on the spine of your favorites novels. If you consider yourself a dark, gritty suspense writer, then identify the other dark, gritty suspense authors out there and note who is publishing them. This gives you a target market.

Also, if you are a romantic suspense author, you face another issue: How to determine the amount of romance in your novel, versus the amount of suspense? For example, some romantic suspense novels are mostly plot with a bit of romance, while others are very romance heavy with only a bit of plot. Think of it as a spectrum with books falling all along the axis. First, you need to determine what is the balance of romance to suspense that you want in your novel. Then you need to find the publisher who likes that ratio.

For example, some publishers prefer seventy percent romance with thirty percent plot (70/30), some prefer an even split (50/50), and some prefer thirty percent romance with seventy percent plot (30/70). THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT DISTINCTION FOR THE ROMANTIC SUSPENSE WRITER: You don't want to go into great detail regarding your fantastic mystery plot to a publisher who prefers the romance angle, and you don't want to spend fifty percent of your synopsis on the romance if you're targeting a publisher who likes suspense.

For example, my first publisher, Silhouette Intimate Moments, prefers romance to plot, say a 70/30 ratio. Thus when I drafted a synopsis for Silhouette, I focused on the romance and gave only the bare bones of the plot. My current publisher, Bantam, on the other hand, prefers plot. Thus, when I write a proposal for them, I dwell almost entirely on the suspense plot, with just enough info on my characters and romance to give them a rough idea. For other publishers, ask around on-line or simply read a lot of their books. That will help you determine which aspects of your story to focus on in your synopsis.

Now, you know your plot hook and/or style hook, you have picked a target publisher and you're starting to get some idea of which aspects of your manuscript to emphasize (ratio of romance to suspense). Can you be even more specific in marketing your proposal?

Of course!

4. Research Editors

One of the glorious advantages of e-mail loops and websites, etc., is that it allows you to ask around. Editors have personnel preferences. I used to work with Gail Chasan at Silhouette. She is a big fan of character development, so when I did a synopsis for her, I focused *even more* on the romance and characters. I also knew it never hurt to include an animal, since I couldn't do brides or babies. ☺

If you're not published, it's obviously harder to get information on an individual editor. You can ask around on e-mail loops, however, or use your editor appointment at conferences as an opportunity to learn more about the individual editor's tastes. Also, many authors will thank their editor in the acknowledgment section of their novels. As

you match up editors with authors, you'll get a sense of what kinds of books that editor obviously enjoys handling.

In conclusion, before you write your synopsis, step back from your book. Think about sales hooks, publisher preferences, and editorial tastes. From here on out, you are writing your proposal with a publisher, if not an individual editor, in mind. If you get bogged down, if your synopsis starts to run away from you, stop and think, does Editor Jane need to know this? Does it help her want to buy the book, or is it simply a tidbit I love and that's why I tossed it in?

Remember to KISS—Keep It Simple Stupid. That will be the start of putting together a successful submission package.

Homework: Consider your manuscript. Do you have a sales hook? *This light marriage of convenience tale features a widowed cowboy, his infant son and his pet rattlesnake named Bubba...* Do you have a position statement? *I write dark, gritty suspense in the tradition of Tami Hoag and Sandra Brown...* Do you have target publishers and their preferences in mind?

Practice writing one of these statements. Review it with your critique partners or someone familiar with your work to see if they agree. This statement will become the focal point of your submission package. Next up—the query letter.