

# 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 Three: Synopsis Overview**

In the next few lectures, we are going to discuss two types of synopses, the short synopsis and the long synopsis. Generally, a short, two to three page synopsis is included with your query letter. If the publisher likes this submission, the editor will request a longer proposal, perhaps the first three chapters of your work and a long, ten to fifteen page synopsis. As always, this can vary from house to house so please follow the guidelines/request of your target publisher.

The goal of a synopsis is to provide a bare bones sketch of your full manuscript. Think set up, major developments, and resolution. Another approach is to cover internal conflict, external conflict, black moment (when hopefully internal and external conflict come to a head) and resolution. Either way, you *must* give the resolution, so if you don't know the ending of your book, think of one.

In addition to providing an overview of your story, a synopsis has the additional burden of showing the flavor of your writing. Like the book blurb in the query letter, you want to reveal your voice in this short document. Funny books should have funny synopses. Dark books should have dark synopses (use lots of foreshadowing, bold statements, etc.).

Basically you have to cover the entire 300-page manuscript in three to ten pages while sounding energetic, tight, and evocative. Piece of cake, right? Let's start with the basics and work our way from there.

**Format:**

Double-spaced

1-inch margins

Standard font

Header on every page: Book title upper left corner, last name and page number upper right corner (e.g., *The Perfect Husband* Gardner Page XX)

**Pointers:**

*Start bold.* Many of us sweat the opening line of our book. Do the same for your synopsis. Don't start with: "Tom Riley is a thirty four year old engineer with blue eyes and black hair." That's bland. Better: "Tom Riley possessed the kind of smile that made women swoon. He knew it. He used it. He always got his way. Until he met Faith Honeywell." Or more evocative: "Sara Smith knew she was truly in trouble the moment she went for her gun—and it was no longer in the cookie jar." Deb Smith gets credit for the best opening line of all time when she begins *A Place to Call Home* with "It started the year I performed as a tap-dancing leprechaun at the St. Patrick's Day carnival and Roanie Sullivan threatened to cut my cousin Carlton's throat with a rusty pocketknife." That's the perfect kind of line to use to start a synopsis as well. Grab the editor's attention first, then summarize the story.

*Stay focused.* In a three-page synopsis, you don't have room for extraneous details. Don't include secondary plots or characters unless they are essential to understanding the resolution. Don't use multiple points of view (POVs), even if they're present in the novel. Remember, KISS...

*Determine your romance vs. suspense focus ahead of time.* It's difficult to cover both romance and suspense, so as we discussed in Lecture One, you should determine your target publisher's priorities ahead of time and use that to guide your effort. A publisher such as Harlequin/Silhouette will want more emphasis on the romance so get to that quickly and end on the note of the romantic resolution.

*Write in present tense.* It's more effective as it provides a sense of urgency.

*Show, don't tell.* Too many writers try to communicate their story by resorting to over-hyped statements such as "Faster than SPEED, harder than DIE HARD." Even phrases such as, "in this roller coaster suspense ride," will get you into trouble as the editor reads the next three pages thinking, Prove it to me. Trust me, you don't want to go there. If your book is fast-paced, don't say it, but show it through a rapid-fire plot. If you're describing the story, you've gotten off track.

*Don't resort to empty questions.* "Will they fall in love? Will she live to see tomorrow?" This is another editorial pet peeve. For one thing, you have to give that answer, so you're wasting valuable space. Plus these sentences (and the hyped statements given above)

yank an editor out of the story. They are “author intrusive.” Instead of letting the story speak for itself, you are speaking for it.

*Proofread thoroughly.* Many editors make it a policy not to continue reading after the third typo. Ouch!

*Sweat the opening three paragraphs.* Most editors conduct a “three paragraph” test. If you haven’t grabbed their interest by then, they won’t read on. A strong opening line helps. Then you want a quick, tight overview of heroine/hero and conflict. If an editor still doesn’t know what your book is about by paragraph four, you are in trouble.

**Conclusion:**

None of this is easy, which is why we’re going to spend several lectures on the nuts and bolts of drafting a great short synopsis. First, we’ll look at two examples of highly effective synopses. Then we’ll look at how to write a great opening, then how to determine the relevant story details to include in the main body. Finally, I’ll provide two generic outlines of the short synopsis.

Next up—two best-in-class examples.