

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 Four: Short Synopsis Examples

Following are two synopsis examples. The first, *Vested Interests* by Moni Draper contains the first three pages of a five-page synopsis targeted for the mainstream suspense market. In it, Moni faces the challenge of trying to best represent a large cast of characters and a complicated plot in a very short space. Moni overcomes these hurdles by using a simple structure and crisp writing style. First she introduces all her characters, including the villain who is a main character in a thriller novel.

Once Moni has established the players, she then moves on to summarizing the key plot points in the novel. Notice, she's focusing on major plot points, not a scene-by-scene summary. We will get to this more in future lectures, but a common beginner mistake is to try to summarize every scene in your novel. Using that method, however, it would be impossible to capture a 100,000 word mainstream novel in only five pages. Thus Moni wisely keeps her synopsis focused on the major events in her novel, providing a smooth, narrative flow. This is a nice example of plot-focused synopsis.

The second synopsis example is *Illusions of Innocence* by Peggy Hendricks. This is an 80,000 word romantic suspense novel targeted for Silhouette Intimate Moments. While Peggy is summarizing a shorter novel, she faces the challenge of adequately explaining a fairly involved murder mystery and an emotionally compelling romance in only three pages. You'll notice she also chooses a very simple structure to get the basic information across.

Once she has introduced her characters and provided an overview of the major conflict, she delves into the emotional implications of the unfolding drama for both the hero and heroine. Also, since Peggy's synopsis is for the category romance market, she doesn't include secondary characters such as the villain, but keeps her synopsis appropriately

focused on the hero and heroine. This is a great example of a wonderfully balanced romantic suspense synopsis.

After each synopsis is a more detailed analysis. In future lectures, we will cover specific points of the synopses in more detail. For example, how to write a good introductory hook, what structure is the best structure, how to determine plot points in your novel, etc. Until then, enjoy these great examples of the short synopsis.

Synopsis Example 1: *Vested Interests* by Moni Draper

This synopsis has been reprinted with permission by Moni Draper. Moni has now sold this book to Starlight Publications. It will be coming out shortly under her pen name, Monette Michaels. Also catch *FATAL VISION*, December 1999, and *DEATH BENEFITS*, April 2000, by Starlight Publications.

Vested Interests:

Something isn't quite right in downtown Indianapolis. An attorney's quest to preserve a small business district makes her a target of the mob...and of a murderer.

BRIGIT BAUER (BREE), attorney, member of the Near Eastside Community Organization, and building owner, unknowingly uncovers a thread that leads her through a maze of holding companies and eventually to the Chicago mob and its business connections to Indianapolis real estate—the Patrone Development Company (PDC).

The PDC operated and ostensibly owned by PAUL PATRONE is in the business of laundering money for the mob under the guise of real estate development. Having left his old life behind as an enforcer for the mob, Patrone, an unstable, superstitious man, is a part of the “new” mob. However, old habits die hard. Patrone feels threatened by Brigit's investigation and concludes that she has to die before she blows the whistle on his whole operation.

Standing in Patrone's way is ANTHONY RHYS PENDRAKE (TONY), former Navy SEAL and owner of T.P. Security, a corporate security consulting company located in the threatened neighborhood. He and his employees have vowed to assist Brigit in anyway they can in getting to the bottom of the bullish market for property in their neighborhood. On a more personal note, Tony has an agenda in working with Bree: he's ready to settle down and has singled her out as his future wife. He just has to convince her that he's the one she's been waiting for.

Vested Interests opens with Patrone's hired gun, JOEY, planning Bree's death and failing when one of Bree's clients eats a poisoned donut meant for her. Joey, an A-type with a previously perfect record, vows to protect his reputation and kill her before the day ends.

Bree and her secretary are concerned that a client was killed in their offices. Before Bree can work on this puzzle, however, she is attacked in her parking garage.

And again, Joey fails, this time through the timely intervention of Tony. Bree is taken to the hospital and kept for observation. Joey follows and takes out three innocent people attempting to finish the job he started on Bree. After failing once again, Joey takes his own life before he can be arrested. Tony, realizing that so many attacks on one person can't be random no matter what the Indianapolis Police Department thinks, checks a concussed Bree out of the hospital and takes her home with him for her protection.

Realizing that his hit man failed, Patrone resorts to using local talent to go after Brigit. This man also fails. Patrone realizes that if you want a hit done right you have to do it yourself. Before he can proceed with his attempt at eliminating Bree, Patrone has to deal with loose ends by killing his coconspirator and laying the blame on him for the botched attempts on Bree's life as well as the money laundering.

Meanwhile, Tony's plans to protect Bree don't run smoothly. He finds that keeping up with the very independent Bree is tricky. Bree resents being told what to do and when to do it. Attempting to carry on with her routine while living under Tony's protection causes increasing tension. Tony's gut is telling him that she is still in danger, and Bree's not buying it.

In protecting Bree, Tony has taken an action that he had vowed he would never take: to ask his cousin, the head of the Chicago mob, for a favor in tracking down the person or persons who had hired the renegade mob hit man, Joey.

Tony's cousin has his own interests in what is going on in Indianapolis. What was supposed to be a legitimate mob business is turning out to be a danger to the mob's financial and security interests. The mob leader suspects that his man in Indianapolis, Patrone, has been skimming funds. To make matters worse, Patrone violated mob law by using a former mob enforcer to make a hit on a woman and other innocents. Patrone has to be stopped, and Tony's cousin does not want his relative to dirty his hands to take care of family business.

[Synopsis continues...]

Lisa's Analysis

1. Nice hook. I like the introduction sentence. It quickly gets my attention. It also tells me exactly what this book is about. Editors are busy. They like to know the heart of a story up front. Moni sets the stage nicely for everything to come.
2. Great set up. The hook gives us the primary conflict, then boom, boom, boom, Moni has set up the three central players. We have a determined heroine, a superstitious mob boss, and a former Navy SEAL. Your mind can already start envisioning the possibilities. Now, I will add that Bree's set up is the weakest. I would like to see one more sentence telling us something about Bree as a person. Hard-working, career-oriented. Tough as nails? As the synopsis develops, we start seeing Bree as a tough, intelligent lady. I'd like to know more of that upfront, that she's worthy of taking on the mob. Also, I would like one more

phrase with Tony. I love that he's selected Brigit to be his wife if he can convince her (sets up romantic tension nicely). I would like to know why, however, as it seems a little abrupt. Even just a phrase, "having come to know Brigit over the past few months/years, Tony has selected her to be his future wife..." would help. That way we understand it's a decision with some reasoning behind it. Otherwise the characters are perfect.

3. Fast paced. This synopsis reads very smoothly. Notice the short paragraphs and tight sentences. This synopsis is also doing something that's very subtle—it's providing a sense of voice. In this case, the synopsis mirrors the tight, crisp flow you expect to read in plot-oriented mainstream novels. Also, the transitions are nice. Sometimes Moni uses gerunds, sometimes subject, sometimes time phrases, but paragraphs flow very well. It may sound petty, but short synopses often have rough transitions from paragraph to paragraph, which jars the editor out of the reading experience.
4. Nice twists. This story also takes off in a direction I didn't expect, which is one of the reasons you include turning points in a synopsis—to impress the editor. I'm intrigued by the notion of Tony getting his cousin involved and by Patrone finding himself in trouble with his own mob. Especially in the mainstream market, it's important to show that you aren't writing the same old thing.

So there you have it. An example of crisp writing, and tight, linear flow. The story is set up and then smoothly outlined. Compared to the many muddled synopses that pass an editor's desk, this one is going to stand out on the strength of the writing alone. Great!

Synopsis Example 2: *Illusions of Innocence* by Peggy Hendricks

Illusions of Innocence is reprinted with the permission of Peggy Hendricks. A former Golden-Heart finalist, Peggy has won numerous awards with this manuscript, including Wisconsin RWA's Fabulous Five Contest and East Texas RWA's Southern Heat Contest. Peggy is currently represented by Pam Hopkins of Hopkins Literary Associates.

Illusions of Innocence:

Hometown boy William Sinclair is in big trouble. His estranged wife is missing, his brother-in-law is dead and Will's the prime suspect. Residents of River Bay, Wisconsin, like those in most small towns, pounce on scandal. Everyone just knows Will Sinclair is guilty. His only chance to plant a seed of reasonable doubt in their closed minds is to hire a highly skilled attorney. The best he knows is a woman who hates his guts.

New York City attorney Annie Wells is fed up with not only her job of defending guilty clients, but also the entire legal system. She's come home to settle her father's estate after his recent death. Questioning her professional ethics and principles, not sure she even wants to continue practicing law, the last thing she wants is to take on another—according to local gossip—potentially guilty client.

Twelve years ago, Annie believed Will was her future. Now she wants him to remain firmly in the past. Only after hearing about the bets placed at a local bar—not on whether Will is guilty or innocent, but on how long he'll spend in prison—does she give in to her deeply ingrained belief that everyone is entitled to a fair trial. She agrees to defend Will. Despite his charm and her attraction, she believes she can maintain an all-business relationship with him.

While the case against Will isn't strong, the evidence is more than circumstantial.

Means: The victim was shot at close range with a .22 caliber gun—the same type owned by every man and boy over the age of fourteen in the county...including Will.

Motive: Will's wife, Caroline, was having an affair with the victim, his sister's husband. The disastrous state of the Sinclair marriage was no secret. No one's surprised that Will killed Neil Carter—only that he didn't kill one of his wife's lovers long before now.

Opportunity: None, as long as the jury is willing to discount the suspicious convenience of Will and his sister being each other's alibi for the time of the murder.

Annie has her work cut out for her. The best defense, she tells Will, is to supply a better suspect than him. She builds her case around evidence that his wife is still alive. Annie believes Caroline killed her lover and framed Will for the murder.

Over the years, Will has done his best not to think about Annie—and what might have been. Since she came back home, though, he can't deny that the old attraction is still simmering between them, even if she refuses to acknowledge it. Just looking at her makes something squeeze hard in his chest. Regret, that's all, he staunchly tells himself. His tender feelings for her are all in the past. If he feels anything at all now, it's lust. Simple, pure, uncomplicated lust. His heart, what's left of it, is his own.

But he underestimates the potent headiness of having someone believe in him. For months, he's been stared at, whispered about, and all but tried and sentenced without ever stepping foot inside the county courthouse. Once Annie makes it clear she wholeheartedly believes in his innocence, he finds denying his attraction to her much more difficult.

Because of their past, they both believe a future together is out of the question, but eventually they give in to their mutual attraction. They make love, denying the possibility that what they feel is love, labeling it consensual sex between two adults. They believe they can resume a physical relationship without becoming emotionally involved.

The case is going well in court. Annie almost has the jury convinced of Will's innocence when Caroline's badly decomposed body is recovered from a shallow grave outside of town. Annie's faith in Will is tested.

Twelve years ago, Annie's lack of trust in Will is what broke them up. This time instead of running away from him and her fears, she stays and fights to discover the truth. She goes back over her case files, studies police reports and state crime lab findings, pours over pictures of the murder scene and reads interviews done with dozens of town residents. She discovers that while she was on the right track in creating reasonable doubt by providing the jury with another suspect, Will's been pushing her away from her first and the most obvious suspect. The victim's grieving widow, Jessica Carson—Will's sister.

Will understands Annie's brief lack of faith in him. Considering the new evidence, he can't blame her. But when she comes to him with plausible evidence that his sister is guilty, he gets angry and orders Annie to leave it alone.

Annie goes straight to Jessica. Annie knows Jessica loves Will. If he's convicted of Neil and Caroline's murders, he'll go to prison for the rest of his life. Using that argument, playing on Jessica's guilt, Annie gets Jessica to admit the truth. Yes, she hated Caroline, Jessica declares. Will might have been inclined to ignore his wife's adulterous ways and the embarrassment of her frequent affairs, but Jess wasn't. Especially when her husband became Caroline's latest conquest.

Annie convinces Jessica to testify in court. Will is released—and devastated. He'd suspected Jess was guilty but wanted to protect her because he blamed himself. If he'd done something about his wife, filed for divorce, never married her in the first place, she wouldn't have turned to Neil in a pathetic attempt to get back at him by hurting the one person he loved most, his sister. Jessica wouldn't have become desperate enough to kill.

Will's also afraid that by not sharing his suspicions with Annie, he's lost any chance that she might love him. Will she run away again like she did ten years ago? She tells him she doesn't agree with the way he kept quiet, but she can understand. Leaving him once was the biggest mistake of her life and one she isn't going to repeat. She loved him then and she loves him now. It's time to put the past behind them and face the future...together.

Lisa's Analysis

1. Nice hook. Peggy establishes immediate drama by opening with very high stakes, a hero on trial for murder. Then she has a great ending for her first paragraph: The only woman who can help him, hates his guts. This kind of strong conflict immediately hooks an editor. It also plays into the romance without having to be obvious; the savvy editor immediately understands the brilliant lawyer will be the romantic interest.
2. Creative, clear set up. This synopsis has a fairly involved plot. A man's been accused of a hideous crime, plus his wife is missing. Peggy does a wonderful job of crisply laying out the plot. Instead of making the classic synopsis error of trying to summarize her book scene by scene, she focuses on relaying the most important information to the editor. Here is the gist of the case against the hero:

Motive, means, opportunity. Here is what the heroine will try to do to save hero. Oops, here's the plot twist that happens next—the ex-wife's body is discovered. And now, here is the resolution. Peggy reveals a great grasp of clear logic flow, one of the most critical aspects of a suspense novel's synopsis.

3. Good use of priorities. Interestingly enough, Peggy never gives us the backstory for Annie and Will. We know they were involved once and it didn't work out, but that's all. Most authors will provide the backstory, but I think Peggy has made a great trade off. She has limited space to cover both a complicated plot and involved romance. So she doesn't waste paragraphs on the past, but keeps us riveted in the present situation. This works very well in this synopsis, as she establishes emotional pull between the hero and heroine based on the present alone. The paragraph where she describes how Will is so touched by Annie's belief in his innocence is very moving. It provides enough of an emotional context that we don't really need to know what happened before to understand their current interest. Thus, Peggy was wise not to waste valuable paragraphs on extraneous information.
4. Well-established characters. In the second paragraph, Peggy neatly sets up the heroine's motivation for helping the hero. As we will discuss, the key details to characterization in a synopsis are goal, motivation, and conflict. In paragraph two, we understand Annie's goal (defend Will), her motivation (her ethics as a lawyer), and her conflict (she's burnt out on her job and wary of getting involved with Will again). Then Peggy neatly does the same for Will. The poor man wants to prove his innocence. His problem is how and who to trust. Also, by including a paragraph on Will's emotional plight—how touched he is by Annie's faith in him—we get a true sense of him as a flesh and blood man. He becomes real to us and we care that much more for what happens to him.
5. Nice closing line. Because this is a romantic suspense story, it's important to end on the right grace note. That is always by returning to the romance. Here, Peggy has built a great deal of emotional tension over Will's arrest, then ratcheted up that tension with the revelation that his sister is the real murderer. To simply end there, while it ties up the plot, would leave the editor feeling unsettled. So Peggy wisely returns to the romance and shows the hero and heroine getting on with life together. This provides more emotional closure and shows that Peggy has done her homework about her market—romance, romance, romance.

Both Moni and Peggy provide solid examples of how to tackle the short synopsis. Now it's time to delve deeper into how to create your own best-in-class example. Next up—establishing the perfect opening hook.