

# Conquering the Dreaded Synopsis: A Series of Ten Lectures

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## **Lecture Seven: Short Synopsis Outlines**

Now that you have written a compelling opening and have identified the key information to include in the main body of your synopsis, you need a good organization system for your thoughts. In all honesty, there is no wrong way to structure a synopsis. You can introduce characters by Zodiac sign if you want, as long as your writing is strong and your logic clear.

For most writers, however, having a generic outline is very helpful. This way you know that you have included all the relevant information in a logical manner. I've played around with many outlines in my time. Following are the two I like best.

The first is a character-focused outline, which is great for targeting editors who care more about the character or romance angle of your story. (See Lecture One on the market.) The second outline is for plot-focused works and is great for snapshotting your brilliant suspense novel.

In each outline, I've used details from my first suspense novel, *The Perfect Husband*, to help flesh out the examples. If you're still unclear about what constitutes a plot point, please refer back to Lecture Six. Hope you enjoy.

### **Short Synopsis Outlines**

#### *The Character-Focused Synopsis*

This is a great approach for Harlequin/Silhouette or any other romance-oriented publisher. This outline is courtesy of Dee Holmes who has written for Silhouette IM, Silhouette Special Edition, Avon, and Berkley. Dee is a self-proclaimed "out-of-the-mist" writer, meaning she hates to know the story before she writes it. If you are also an "out-of-the-mist" writer, this method works well as it focuses on character conflicts instead of specific plot points. Thus you can provide a preview of your novel, without

learning so much about the story that you lose interest in writing it. This outline is also a nice exercise for character development.

**HOOK:** Either a unique opening line from a character's perspective, or a snappy/humorous/dramatic opening line previewing the book's premise. From TPH, Tess Williams knows about fear. She knows how the floorboards in an old house can creak at night, each stair giving way as a shadowy man comes closer, closer, closer. For Tess Williams, that man was her own husband, coming to get her after she turned him over to the police for allegedly killing eight women. That night began with her husband attacking her with a baseball bat while their four-year old daughter slept down the hall. That night ended with Tess firing the shot that finally wounded Jim enough to halt the attack. Jim went to jail. Tess and her daughter tried to get on with their lives. But now Jim Beckett has broken out of prison. He has killed two prison guards. He has promised to come after his ex-wife. Tess Williams knows about fear...

**INTERNAL CONFLICT:** Two paragraphs, one for the heroine and one for the hero, describing their relevant backstory and the key internal conflicts they must overcome to find love. You want to focus on the layers here—the past marriages, relationships with parents, or pivotal trauma that has molded your character and made her who she is. This internal conflict will be overcome during the black moment, when your character realizes her weakness/fear and leaves it behind in the name of love.

**EXTERNAL CONFLICT:** One paragraph, usually the set up that brings the hero and heroine together and establishes the external conflict blocking their way. Could be the hit man trying to kill them, the brother's name to clear, the serial killer ex-husband, etc.

**HERO AND HEROINE WORK TOGETHER:** First plot point that makes the hero and heroine temporarily overlook their differences to work together. In *The Perfect Husband* (TPH), it would be when the hero, J.T., decides against his better judgment to take on the heroine, Tess, as a client. So the external conflict makes the hero and heroine join forces despite their reservations.

**INTIMACY:** The forced contact of working together and of course, raging attraction, make the hero and heroine (h/h) succumb to physical intimacy—whether first kiss, make love, whatever. For TPH, I'd skip to their first sex scene, since in three pages I don't have space to go over each "almost" moment.

**MORNING AFTER:** H/H promptly remember all their fears, fall back on their internal conflicts and reject each other. In TPH, J.T. falls back on his fear of commitment, not wanting to get involved, etc., etc.

**H/H WORK TOGETHER AGAIN:** Next big plot complication brings h/h back together. For example, Jim Beckett kidnaps Tess's daughter and J.T. promptly vows to help Tess do whatever is necessary to get her daughter back.

**SHOWDOWN/BLACK MOMENT:** In TPH, the big showdown is Tess's decision to serve as bait for her ex-husband. Jim Beckett then storms the safe house and kills

everyone in his path. This leads to Tess's black moment, when she must face down her fear and find the internal reserves to take on Beckett. She shoots him, thereby saving J.T.'s life, but also more importantly, proving to herself that she is no longer a victim

RESOLUTION: The bad guys are revealed/caught. H/H live happily ever after.

#### *Plot-Focused Synopsis*

The Plot-Focused Synopsis outlines key plot points and would be good for mainstream submissions where character issues are of secondary importance.

HOOK: Same as above

HEROINE INTRO: Who the heroine is, her primary goal and motivation. For Tess Williams in TPH, it would be that after spending two year running in fear from her ex-husband, she's determined to take a stand for herself and her daughter. All she wants is someone to train her in the business of death.

HERO INTRO: Who the hero is, his primary goal and motivation. J.T. is a drunken ex-mercenary who wants to be left alone. He believes he has failed all the people who were important to him, and the only emotions he allows himself now are self-loathing and rage. He carries a great deal of rage.

VILLIAN INTRO: Who the antagonist is, his primary goal and motivation. Jim Beckett, former police officer and husband, is a psychopath. He killed ten women before his wife and local authorities put him away. Now escaped from prison, he has declared revenge upon everyone who put him there, especially his traitorous ex-wife, Tess.

SET UP/PLOT POINT ONE: Tess shows up at J.T.'s ranch asking for help. He refuses, but when she passes out, ends up having to give her a room for the night. Facing a fresh round of persistent arguments in the morning, he half-heartedly agrees to train her.

PLOT POINT 2: Beckett infiltrates the police task force to learn the status of his investigation. He then leaves the cops a pointed message (dead body) that he's still interested in finding his wife and capable of using the police to do it.

PLOT POINT 3: J.T.'s sister, an FBI agent pays an unexpected visit. She is concerned by Tess's presence and tracks down Tess's real identity by sending her fingerprints to the local police. Marion is aghast to learn that Tess is in legitimate danger from her psychopathic ex-husband, and worse, Marion has just compromised her safety by involving the local police. Everyone knows Jim Beckett is very good at getting information from the cops. Now, everyone fears Jim Beckett will head to Arizona, and Tess isn't ready to face down her ex-husband.

TURNING POINT 1: Jim Beckett does not head to Arizona. He heads to central Massachusetts where he kills a police officer and kidnaps his own daughter. The police mobilize in an even bigger way...but Jim Beckett is nowhere to be found.

PLOT POINT 4: Tess returns to Massachusetts against all advice, determined to face down her husband. Jim Beckett promptly attacks Tess and J.T. at the crime scene. Only J.T.'s 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 out in their old house, knowing that Beckett cannot resist the challenge of coming after her. Once and for all, it will be done

RESOLUTION: Jim Beckett comes after Tess. By killing an FBI agent downtown, then taking out one of the rooftop snipers, he splits the protective task force, and descends upon his terrified wife. He is no match, however, for the combined force of J.T. and Tess. Beckett is killed. Tess's little girl is recovered alive. Family reunited.

### **Conclusion**

While there is no right or wrong way to organize a short synopsis, utilizing any given outline can be very helpful. Something like a character-focused outline can help you highlight the romance element of your novel for the discerning romance editor. Likewise, the plot-focused structure can help distill a complicated thriller into a tight reading experience for the suspense-savvy editor. Knowing the preferences of your target publisher will help you choose the right approach for your synopsis.

Then, have fun with the outline. Work on a commanding opening and a clear summary of key scenes. Short synopses are never as enjoyable as novels, but they can be tolerable. Next up—the long synopsis.