

Conquering the Dreaded Synopsis: A Series of Ten Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

Lecture Five: Creating a Strong Hook

In Lecture Four, we covered the purpose of a short synopsis and examined two great examples. For Lectures Five and Six, we're going to look at the short synopsis in more detail, starting with the opening (Lecture Five) and then the main body (Lecture Six). In Lecture Seven, we'll conclude our examination of the short synopsis by considering two possible outlines—one geared for character-focused synopses and one for plot-oriented works. For the record, there is an infinite number of ways to structure a synopsis; you simply need to find the structure that works best for you.

Regardless of which outline you choose, however, you will always have two key components in your short synopsis. You will start with a HOOK. Then you will summarize your story's main PLOT POINTS. For today's lecture, we're going to focus on part A, the opening hook. A good synopsis, just like a good novel, needs to open with a bang.

The Hook

The hook can be from one sentence up to three paragraphs long. The goal is to grab the editor's attention and establish your writing voice in one fell swoop. In Moni Draper's *Vested Interests*, the hook is the first two sentences—a nice dramatic opening that immediately hints of danger. Peggy Hendricks also utilizes a dramatic opening in her synopsis for *Illusions of Innocence*. The hero's wife has vanished, he's the prime suspect in a murder, and the only woman who can help him hates his guts. Now, that's a guy having a bad day. Note how Peggy injects a hint of dry humor in her opening through her references to the town. Her opening is riveting, but the tone is also different than Moni Draper's. Both are writing about murder, but both are already establishing their unique voice. Establishing voice, as you will remember from past lectures, is a hallmark of a great synopsis. The opening hook is your first opening to show your unique writing style.

To come up with the best hook for your synopsis, you'll want to refer to your market homework analyzing the most sellable components of your novel. Then you'll want to consider how to craft a brief, but engaging introduction. Given the limited length of the short synopsis, you have only two or three paragraphs for your hook, so be clever. Think about injecting your writing with drama, energy, or humor, whichever is most appropriate. And get to the heart of the conflict of your novel—fast!

The best hook is a strong opening punch to command editorial interest. There are several techniques you can try.

1. Evocative opening line, e.g., “Sara Smith knew she was in trouble when she went for her gun...and it was no longer in the cookie jar.”
2. Humor, e.g., “Barbara finally had the perfect boyfriend. He was handsome, wealthy, and even punctual. The only problem was that he didn't actually exist.”
3. Drama, e.g., “After that night, Sandy Kincaid stopped looking back. She kept her eyes forward and her life focused ahead. Bigger, better, stronger, that's what she told herself. Because anything was better than slowing down and feeling the past creep up on her. Anything was better than remembering that night, and what he had looked like dead.”
4. Dialogue, e.g., “Hey, you the one who wanted the mail order bride? Just sign right here.”

The possibilities for opening your synopsis, of course, are endless. Remember this is art, not an English paper. Fragments are acceptable. So are colloquialisms. You can start out in deep POV, as if you're inside the character's head. You can also experiment with third person omniscient, creating drama as a narrator coldly describes the scene. The important thing is to grab attention and establish a voice consistent with what the editor will find in the completed novel.

Here are two examples of excellent set ups. Notice how well the writers establish voice while simultaneously providing the relevant information about character and conflict. After these paragraphs, the writers can transition to a concise summary of the major plot points, content that they have grabbed the editor's attention and revealed their writing strengths.

Example 1: *Romance Brings Death* by Jennifer Apodaca

Romance Brings Death is reprinted here with the permission of Jennifer Apodaca, a member of Orange County RWA. Jennifer has completed five manuscripts, and her experience shows through in this great example of using zany humor and lively writing to energize the beginning of her synopsis and grab a busy editor's attention.

Romance Brings Death

SAMANTHA SCHOLL is trying to rebuild her life after her condom-selling, panty-stealing, waste of skin husband dies eating peanut candy. Leaving her soccer mom days behind, Sam buys the Heart Mates Dating Service. All she needs now is a few clients.

A stun-gun wielding client demanding a half million dollars is not what she had in mind. The permanent marker message he left on her favorite Nordstrom's skirt makes her situation frighteningly clear—Sam has five days to find the money, or she and her kids will end up as dead as her husband.

TRENT SCHOLL had been doing more than selling condoms. Prior to his death, he had an account with Heart Mates. It appears that he was running drugs sealed up in the condom packages and skimming money from the profits. Sam has no idea where the money is.

Help comes in the form of handsome, charming Detective MORGAN ROSSI and bad boy sexy Private Investigator GABE PULUZZI. Rossi focuses on the missing money and why Sam would buy Heart Mates without so much as a CPA looking at the books. Gabe is teaching Sam to take care of herself and her boys. Both men are tempting her libido out of retirement.

Example 2: *Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch* by Debby Conrad

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch, is reprinted here with the permission of Debby Conrad, a 1998 Golden Heart Finalist. Debby has a naturally dramatic voice, which she skillfully demonstrates in these brief three paragraphs. Note the use of sentence fragments and a great, cliffhanger ending to build interest. This kind of bold set up is a great way to reveal voice before going into the “nuts and bolts” outline of the short synopsis.

Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch

Luke Galloway doesn't lie. Well, not normally. And never about something as serious as death. But, somehow Luke's friend and business partner, Sam Paris, convinces Luke that he needs to do just that.

Sam hasn't seen his daughter, Rusty, for twenty-one years, and he'll do anything to get her to come back to his horse farm. Forget the fact that she's lived all over the world, and in more exotic places than Red Ridge, Kentucky. The way Sam figures it, the only way he'll ever get Rusty to come home and give up her high society lifestyle, is if Sam were dying.

And so the lie begins.

Conclusion

The first three paragraphs of your short—or long—synopsis are among the three most important paragraphs you will ever write. This is your opportunity to present both the marketing hook in your novel, and also to show off your writing style. By starting strong, you encourage an editor to take your proposal seriously—and to keep reading.

If you have been writing synopses you feel are flat or lack interest, revisit your opening three paragraphs. Next up—plot points!