

How to Write a Synopsis

First off, what is a synopsis and why write one? Professionals in the film industry – those intrigued by your concept, won't always ask to read your script. Why? They simply do not have the time so instead, they ask you to send over or leave a synopsis or one-sheet. A synopsis hits on all the important beats, moments, or elements in your screenplay.

The good news is that being able to write a synopsis is crucial when it comes to leaving a one-sheet if your pitch is successful. One-sheets are usually no more than a page in length and have more than just your synopsis on them but the synopsis part is definitely one of the most important elements contained on it aside from your contact information.

Knowing how to write a synopsis is part of the trade. A writer definitely limits themselves if they do not have this ability. In fact, consider this “how-to” as the first step in becoming an expert at writing a synopsis... Read more articles and experiment with different techniques until you feel both comfortable and confident that your synopses are doing their job. Becoming an expert comes with practice. A great exercise is to pick a few of your favorite films and write out both a logline and synopsis for them.

A synopsis is really nothing more than a short description of your screenplay. The typical synopsis consists of a plot summary of the screenplay on one side of a sheet of paper and usually contains no more than 400 words. It highlights your main characters and what they go through during your story. A good synopsis will focus a lot of attention to conflict and resolution.

Many synopses are written after completion of the screenplay but it's often a good idea to write out a synopsis before you even begin with FADE IN on your screenplay especially if you're trying to sell an idea to a producer ahead of time.

A good synopsis a very good tool to help writers develop an idea for a screenplay and eventual movie. A synopsis does not try to tell the whole story... Rather, it focuses on a few characters and the most important parts of the story. A good synopsis makes the person who reads it *want* to see the movie.

Elements to be aware of when writing a good synopsis...

- Limit your synopsis to one page or less.
- Include a sentence or two about your beginning scenes.
- Describe where the story happens and at least the major character.
- Other characters can be introduced, but don't make the synopsis too detailed.
- Include the most important conflict or events in the story.
- Use the present tense except for events that come before the story.
- Link synopsis paragraphs to one another in a logical way – so they flow.
- Write your synopsis paragraphs so anyone can understand your story.
- Try to convince your reader that your story is interesting and would make a great movie.
- Include a sentence or two about your ending scenes.
- Let your voice or style come through in your synopsis.
- Always proofread your synopsis for correct style, grammar, and usage.

The test your synopsis, ask yourself the following questions...

- Does my synopsis give a producer an accurate view of my story?
- Based on my synopsis, could a producer easily pitch my screenplay to others?
- Can my synopsis be easily understood or is it too complicated of a read?
- Is my synopsis bogged down with too many unimportant or unnecessary details?

If your synopsis does not answer each of the above questions with a definitive “Yes,” then it is very likely your synopsis needs more work. Always consider having your synopsis critiqued by the same people you share your script with before going out with it. Get feedback and tweak as necessary.

Begin your synopsis by expanding on your logline and actually turning it into a three-act story. In other words, tell it as a story and follow the same order as your screenplay if you've already written it. If you're using a synopsis as a screenplay development tool, it would be handy to have your outline at this point – assuming you use one.

If so, use your outline to begin telling your story as defined above. If you're using this synopsis as a way to get people in the business to request your screenplay, stay focused on *that aspect* as you write it out.

You obviously want your synopsis to demonstrate your mastery of the craft. Give the person reading it a clear idea about what your story is about by providing them with clearly defined characters and a solid story that contains a beginning, middle, and end.

You don't have to give everything away, either – use this opportunity to paint broad strokes yet at the same time, teasing your reader into wanting to know more.

Checklist for Writing a Screenplay Synopsis if using it to pitch your screenplay...

- At the top of the page, you want your title... Underneath your title, it's a good idea to let anyone reading your synopsis that it is in fact, a synopsis... So underneath your title, skip a line and on the next line, type, “Synopsis by” without the quotation marks. Now skip another line and type your name and underneath that, your contact information.
- Let your reader know what kind of setting your story/screenplay takes place in. Give them both the time and place, along with a little bit of background information.
- Use third person to tell your story in three acts i.e., follow the order of your story/screenplay.
- Use present tense to write the story in your synopsis.
- Briefly describe your main characters as they appear in your story.
- Be sure to include any key or important scenes and culminating events.
- Do not include any dialogue from any of your characters unless absolutely necessary.
- When revealing your ending, be sure to tie up all loose ends.

Below is an example synopsis for *A FEW GOOD MEN*, formatted as outlined above.

A FEW GOOD MEN

Synopsis by

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A plea-bargaining Navy lawyer risks both career and prison if he exposes the commanding officer who ordered the hazing of a screw-up Marine his two clients are accused of murdering.

Lieutenant JG Daniel “Danny” Kaffee, an inexperienced U.S. Navy lawyer, leads the defense in the court-martial of two Marines, Lance Corporal Dawson, and PFC Downey. Both accused of murdering a fellow Marine, PFC William Santiago, at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, which is under the command of Colonel Nathan R. Jessup.

Santiago is a screw-up. He goes outside the chain to bargain for a transfer in exchange for blowing the whistle on Dawson for firing an illegal shot towards Cuba. Santiago's commanding officer, Lt. Jonathan Kendrick asserts to both Jessup and Jessup's executive officer, Lt. Colonel Matthew Andrew Markinson that he can handle Santiago.

When Dawson and Downey are arrested for Santiago's murder, Naval investigator and lawyer Lieutenant Commander Joanne Galloway suspects they were carrying out a “code red,” a euphemism for extrajudicial punishment. She requests to defend them but command turns the case over to Kaffee.

Kaffee meets the defendants and finds them to be a little too gung-ho. He tries to both plea-bargain the case, then step down as lead counsel, realizing he was assigned this case due to his reputation for plea-bargaining, indicating someone high up didn't want the case to go to trial and because of that revelation, he proceeds to trial. During trial, it's established code reds are standard at Gitmo, as a means of getting screw-ups to get it together.

Eventually Galloway convinces Kaffee to call Jessup as a witness at great risk to his career. After questioning Jessup about his travel habits and comparing those to Santiago's, he accuses Jessup of ordering a code red on Santiago. Both prosecution and the judge object, but Jessup is caught in a lie. He stated Santiago was to be transferred off base for his safety in case other Marines sought retribution, but also stated Marines are honorable and always follow orders. Kaffee argues if other Marines were ordered to leave Santiago alone and always follow orders, Santiago would have been in no danger and thus, Jessup's argument that Santiago was to be transferred was a lie. Under pressure from Kaffee, Jessup furiously declares “You can't handle the truth!” and dismisses Kaffee as disrespectful of a Marine doing his duty, at which point he admits to ordering the code red. As Jessup angrily justifies his actions on the basis of national security, Ross arrests him, and the defendants are found not guilty of murder.

Regardless, the two Marines are dishonorably discharged for causing Santiago's death through their “conduct unbecoming a United States Marine.” Downey does not understand why they are given dishonorable discharges, but Dawson accepts the verdict, and explains to Downey they failed to stand up for those too weak to stand up for themselves. As the two prepare to leave, Kaffee tells Dawson he doesn't need a patch on his arm to have honor. Dawson, who had previously been reluctant to respect Kaffee as an officer, barks “There's an officer on deck!” and salutes Kaffee.