

Writing the Synopsis Before the Book

Writers like to divide themselves into two categories: those who plot and those who don't. I'm a plotter. I wasn't always one, but years ago, in an effort to write faster and tighter, I decided I would learn about plotting. After all, if I hated it, I wouldn't have to do it again. To my delight, I found a myriad of methods and loved it.

Here's why I love plotting. It forces me to understand the main points of the book before I write. When I nail those down, I have a clearer idea of how my characters will grow and the events that will shape them along the way. Plus, the saggy middle virtually disappears. With a firm plan, I write first drafts quickly.

I can't take credit for the plotting methods I use. All of them were borrowed from other writers generous enough to share their secrets. Some were found on websites, some from word of mouth, and others through books on the writing craft. Randy Ingermanson's Snowflake Method made a big impact on me, and you can read all about it at <http://www.advancedfictionwriting.com/art/snowflake.php>.

The following is based on my experiment to find the best plotting method for me. However, you should experiment to find the best method for *you*.

First, decide what genre book you are writing. Different genres require different pacing, tension, and plot development. I write romance novels so my books revolve around two characters' journey to love. I sift through possible ideas and settle on the characters and the premise of my book before I plot. When I have a hero, a heroine, and a hook, I begin brainstorming their goals, motivations, and conflicts. Then I begin plotting.

The following is a step-by-step process that is inside-out from many author's techniques. If you are not published and think it's strange to write the synopsis before you write, be aware that after you're published, you'll usually submit a detailed synopsis with the first three chapters—before you've written the entire book.

Basic Plotting and the One-Page Synopsis:

1. Write the summary of your book in one sentence of fifteen words or less.
2. Get to know your characters. I fill out basic character sheets and figure out their goals, motivations, conflicts, and what's keeping them from falling in love.
3. Expand your fifteen word sentence to five sentences:
 - a. The Hook (Story set-up)
 - b. Leaves Ordinary World (Act One)
 - c. Mid-Point (Act Two)
 - d. Black Moment (Act Three)
 - e. Finale (Ending)
4. Expand each of the above sentences into a full paragraph

5. For romance authors: Write one paragraph describing the heroine's story goal, her motivation to achieve the goal, and the conflict or what's stopping her from getting what she wants. Repeat for the hero. Spell out their inner conflicts keeping them from embracing love.
For other authors: Write one paragraph describing the main character's story goal, the motivation to achieve the goal, and the conflict keeping him or her from getting the goal.
6. Create a file for your new book in your word processor. Create a single-spaced document called one-page synopsis in this file. Copy the paragraphs you wrote in the following order:
 - The hook
 - Heroine's GMC (goal, motivation, conflict)
 - Hero's GMC
 - Leaves ordinary world
 - Mid-point
 - Black Moment
 - Finale

Many of you might want to stop here. You have the basics of the story. You have an idea for the beginning, middle and end, and you're ready to write. The one-page synopsis can easily be double-spaced and expanded into a longer synopsis whenever you decide.

Getting through the one-page synopsis is not enough for me. I don't feel comfortable writing until I have a complete map of the story. However, I have more questions to answer before expanding to a longer synopsis.

Advanced Plotting and the Longer Synopsis:

1. Answer the following questions.
 - a. After the hook (set-up) and the character leaves her ordinary world, what events could happen to get the character to the midpoint of the novel? Brainstorm different options and weigh each to make sure they advance your character to her next plot point. For each event, write how the character grows, how the stakes rise, and how the conflict increases. You might not use everything you think of, but it's nice to have options.
 - b. Do the same for the mid-point to the black moment. These events should escalate, making things worse for your character in terms of her story goal.
2. Expand your one-page synopsis into a double-spaced longer synopsis. I aim for five pages.
 - a. Save your one-page synopsis as a new file.
 - b. After the paragraph where your character leaves the ordinary world, write two or three (or more) paragraphs describing the events leading up to the midpoint. More important than the actual events is how the events affect the character. In other words, include the "because" with the "and then."
 - c. After the paragraph about the mid-point, write two or three (or more) paragraphs describing the events leading from the mid-point to the black moment.
 - d. Flesh out any paragraphs needing more explanation.

At this point, you should feel comfortable with where your book is headed. If all this plotting makes you cry “uncle,” then stop here. But there’s another step to take if you want to plot your book in more detail. You can plot each scene.

For my scene plotting process, check out Plotting the Scene in the Articles page of my website, www.jillkemerer.com.

Whether you decide to try a few steps or go all the way and write your long synopsis before writing, I hope this information leads you to a better understanding of your book. But remember, there is no right way or wrong way to write. If plotting doesn’t suit you, don’t force it.

For more information about Jill or to read more articles like this, go to www.jillkemerer.com.