

Taming the Synopsis

(A course formerly entitled “Catching the Editor’s Eye”)

By Rachel Carrington

Introduction

You've just finished your manuscript or maybe you have the finish line in sight. Are you wondering what next? In between editing your book and preparing the query letter to your targeted agent or editor, there's a step you must take...writing the synopsis.

If you're like I was a few years back, your face is wrinkling right now, and the dread is settling in. What if I were to tell you it didn't have to be that way? What if I could show you a quick, precise way to write your synopsis and make it as enjoyable as writing the manuscript? What if I could make you look forward to your book's ending just so you could get to the synopsis? Or maybe even help you to write the synopsis as you wrote the book.

Impossible, you say? Did you think it was impossible for you to write a novel? Did you think it was impossible to actually finish the novel? As writers, we live in the land of impossibility and imagination. Nothing is impossible as long as we have imagination. That's what writing a synopsis is all about. Yes, there's a suggested outline to follow. Yes, there are certain rules, so to speak, but that doesn't mean writing a synopsis has to be boring or a fearsome task. I'll show you how to push past the barriers and unlock your excitement. After all, your book is finished and you've come a long way. The rest is a piece of cake.

Once you start thinking about the synopsis differently, the apprehension will dissipate, and the excitement you felt when you first started your novel will carry over into describing your masterpiece to an editor. I can't guarantee all of your feelings will change, but maybe, just maybe, you'll look at this synopsis in a new light, the light that shines most favorably on your manuscript.

Lesson 1: WRAPPING IT UP

Here, we'll start with the basics. Before you can start the query and the synopsis, you need to make sure your book is ready to go. Why? Because, quite simply, the best query letter and synopsis out there won't sell your book if you haven't polished your manuscript. In this lesson, we'll cover....

- Basic editing strategies
- The importance of two pairs of eyes
- Unnecessary adverbs and adjectives
- Punctuating with words.

Now, let's get started!

Editing Your Masterpiece

Okay, you've poured your blood, sweat, and tears into writing this 400 page mammoth novel, and you think it's ready to be shipped off to a well-known publisher, who, of course, will snap it up because you wrote it. So you package your baby and send it out with fingers and toes crossed only to receive a curt rejection back in the mail less than two weeks later.

Huh? What could you have possibly done wrong and how did an editor find it so soon? The first page of your manuscript tells a lot about your abilities as a writer which is why we're going to cover a couple of basic editing strategies that every writer should learn.

- **That isn't all it's cracked up to be**

How many times have you used that in one paragraph? One scene? Most of them are unnecessary. Take a look at the example below:

Jimmy knew that he'd have a hard time finishing his essay before dinner.

Now, let's try it another way.

Jimmy knew he'd have a hard time finishing his essay before dinner.

While this may seem to be fairly simplistic, I had an editor tell me to clean up my manuscript by removing this one little word. We'll cover more unnecessary words in the next section, but first, let's take a look at other editing strategies which will help make your manuscript the sharpest it can be.

- **Choose Your Point of View**

A familiar term in this industry is *head-hopping*, better known as bouncing from one person's point of view to another's in the same scene. While this works quite well for most well-known authors, for first-time writers, you should choose the point of view before you write the scene. Do you want the readers to see the heroine's thoughts? The abandoned little boy on the street corner? Or are you narrating your story and want the reader to only hear you? Make sure you decide who you want leading that scene so your readers don't get confused as to who is thinking what. And while I'm on the subject of point of view, let me make one simple, though monumental, note.

- **Watch out for the vanity viewpoints!**

If you're telling your scene from your hero's point of view, he can't see his green eyes narrow in confusion, and likewise, the little girl who's throwing a temper tantrum in time-out doesn't think about her blond ringlets. I'm sure you're getting my point.

Okay, those are pretty basic, although very necessary, edits. You'll be surprised how clean your manuscript looks when you self-edit and believe me when I say, you'd much rather do it yourself than have an editor reject your manuscript on your first page alone.

Lesson 1: WRAPPING IT UP

More Than Just a Onceover, Please

As we begin this next section, I feel I should warn you. I'm a big fan of proofreaders, and I'm not talking about the author reading over his or her own work. While that's all well and good, it doesn't make up for an extra set of eyes perusing your printed words. I know some of you are

probably horrified at the thought of someone else reading your work of art, especially before an editor can catch the whiff of the fresh ink. I refer you to Lesson 1, Section 1. If the editor doesn't make it past the first page because of typos, redundancies, and inconsistencies, what have you accomplished? Let's move on...

Pick out a chapter of your novel. It doesn't matter which one. This is simply an exercise and will, hopefully, show you what I'm talking about. Read it aloud. Make any corrections you feel you need to make. Now, for the ultimate test, ask someone you trust to read it. Not someone who's going to pat you on the back and tell you what a great job you did. I'm talking about someone who can and will be brutally honest with you. (More on the type of brutality I'm talking about in the final lesson.) Give this trustworthy person a red pen and leave the room. There's no need for you to cringe while the person formally known as your friend marks any suggested corrections.

All done? Now, go rescue your chapter and let's have a look. Did your friend find mistakes you didn't? Are there red lines all over your page, deletion marks, or punctuation insertions? Probably. Does this mean you have to make all the suggested changes? That's a call you have to make. Does it mean you aren't a good proofreader? Not at all. You would do the same for your friend had she written the next New York Times Bestseller. What these found mistakes mean is that you've worked with this book for months or maybe even years, and it's easy to skim over mistakes because you know the work. One final thought and we'll tackle the task of polishing your novel.

Don't ask someone to read your manuscript and expect it back within a day or even a week. Depending on the length of your novel and your proofreader's schedule, edits can take several weeks. Be patient while they're combing through the mass of words and get to work on your next novel. Oh, and maybe I don't need to tell you this, but I'll share anyway. Don't forget to thank your proofreader. Cash is always accepted, but if this is the month rent is due and your car needs new tires, I'm sure your proofreader will settle for heartfelt appreciation.

Talk to Me

Now, we've reached the last section on editing and the last I'll say about this important subject during this lesson. Let's take a simple sentence.

She was very pretty.

Those four simple words say what the writer wants to convey, but what does the reader see? Do they picture a voluptuous blonde with artificially white teeth, or do they just skim the words and move on? As writers, we have the ability to use words as our tools, to shape and define a novel into a moving picture of words. Now, let's try the sentence again, and this time, let's jazz it up a little.

Her beauty haunted him.

Hmm, certainly better than what we last tried, isn't it? It packs a different punch. It's obvious to a reader that the writer isn't talking about your everyday attractive woman, at least not where the hero is concerned. I'm sure you get my point here. Words can either speak to or bore a reader. Get in the habit of using active verbs which catch the reader off-guard, words that will linger long after the reader's eyes have covered the last page.

Before we segue into shaping a query letter, let's make sure your manuscript is ready to face the challenges of an editor's weary eyes. Let's try a simple exercise. Take one chapter of your novel and using that marvelous "find" feature on your word processor, search for

unnecessary adverbs like very and really. You might be surprised to see how many of those words you use.

What about boring adjectives like pretty and handsome? In my first romance novel, I used pretty to describe the heroine every single time she entered a room. Twenty-two years and many novels later, I've discovered an expanded vocabulary which makes my readers see what my characters are doing.

Which brings me to my final point...**making your words work for you**. As important as this is in your manuscript, it's equally important in the first glimpse an editor gets of your talent. Anyone can write a book composed of simple, boring sentences like I was bored or She read the book. But can you excite the reader using different verbs? How about My brain screamed in agony as boredom set in, and She combed the linen pages of the book, held captive by the story? [Writer's Digest.com](http://www.writersdigest.com) has more excellent tips on creative writing and editing under the fiction tips. Be sure and check out the archived tips as well.

Your novel is yours and yours alone. No one can tell you how to change it or how to tell the story you want to tell, but these guidelines can make your story better...if you'll let them.

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Lesson 2: THAT DARNED QUERY LETTER

Your query doesn't just introduce your book, it introduces you, and while good grammar and punctuation are important, so is excitement. You can't expect an editor to yawn through your query letter and yet still be interested in seeing your book. In this lesson, we'll cover...

Who am I?-A short, yet enticing biography even if you haven't gotten published.

Summing up the book

Making the summary speak to the editor

Conversational letters vs. professional letters

An invitation without a demand

The importance of keeping it simple.

A Quick Look

Okay, you've edited, cleaned, and polished your manuscript and now you're ready to catch the editor's eyes. While many editors will take unsolicited manuscripts, most usually want a query letter first. This is your chance to dazzle them, to make your novel stand out above all the other 400 page manuscripts they receive in a day. So we're off to examine the internal workings of a query letter and how it can help you achieve your dream of publication.

Query letters do not have to be the bane of your existence. In fact, with practice, you can even learn to grow excited about the prospect of preparing your manuscript to see the light of day. When I've completed a manuscript, I pull out my tried and true outline for query letters and get going. Here it is:

The opening hook followed by a short summary of the book;

A little about me; and

Some thinly veiled groveling. (This is a joke. Keep your dignity.)

Below is a sample query letter that I recently used in submitting a fantasy novel to one of my publishers. Take a few minutes to review the letter before we begin discussions.

Lark Hogan is a martial arts expert who has been trained to handle almost anything, except for the death of her sister at the hands of a madman. Seeking vengeance, Lark sets out to stop him, but though endowed with special gifts, she knows she can't do it without help.

Zac is a mystery and a dangerous ally for Lark. He is a mercenary, an independent wizard who lives life only for himself, loving no one. The last thing he wants to do is help this sexy, lethal woman who confronts him, even if she knows what he is.

Confronting a common enemy, Lark and Zac battle their own demons as well as their own powerful attraction, and when sex gives way to love, this couple will fight to the death to protect what they've found.

I would like to submit my novella, "Breathless" to you for consideration.

I'm a published author of contemporary, fantasy and paranormal romances. I currently write for Ellora's Cave and Five Star/Gale and previously participated in a charity anthology with such best-selling authors as Susan Grant, Mary Janice Davidson, and Patricia Rice.

I am a diverse writer who has worked hard to refine my skills while building a reader base. I have received exceptional reviews for all of my releases. Harriet Klausner called my paranormal romance released by Five Star/Gale "a potent reading experience" while A Romance Review calls my time travel erotic romance, Choices, "a winner from the first page to the very last."

Pursuant to your website guidelines, I have enclosed the first ten pages of my book along with a one page synopsis. I would be happy to send you a partial or even a full manuscript if you would like to review my work further. Thank you for taking the time to review this query. I look forward to hearing from you. I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

I probably don't need to even say this next sentence, but as you've probably already figured out, I'm going to anyway.

Always, always, always open your query letter with a hook.

You have to catch the editor's eye and attention within a few seconds. See how I did it with the query letter you just read? A unique start to the query letter sets the tone and gains the editor (or agent's) interest. If your novel has a catchy title, it might be appropriate to use that as your opening line.

Now, let's dust off our fears and tackle the query letter process.

Lesson 2: THAT DARNED QUERY LETTER

Who am I?

If you're like I was once upon a time, you're already thinking that the biography is going to be one of the hardest things you have to write, especially if you haven't been published before, you're not a member of any organizations, and, well, frankly, you don't think you have

anything in your background which is going to impress an editor. How happy are you going to be when I tell you it isn't necessary to impress an editor with who you are? It's true. If an editor isn't impressed with your work, your biography won't change his/her mind.

Before I became so active in my writing career and started seeing the fruits of my labors, I kept my biography short and sweet. See example below:

Though I am not published, I am a member of the National Writers Union and am working extensively to build my skills and learn more about the art of writing.

Now that the first sale has taken place and my writing career has taken a different path, my biography has changed as referenced in the sample query letter I just shared with you.

While contest wins and organizational memberships look good on paper, ultimately, they are not the deciding factors for an acceptance of a novel. Your ability is, and no amount of window dressing with your biography will sway an editor to accept your novel if the talent isn't there.

Last, but certainly not least, keep the biography simple. You're writing a bio not a resume. There's no need to let the editor know if you wrote a school play in the third grade or the date you first started writing. Keep it short, simple and strong.

Summing it Up

After you've sketched out your biography, decided on your hook, and stared at your computer screen for as much time as it would have taken you to read War and Peace, you know what's coming. It's time to squeeze the main points of your story into one or two short paragraphs. (I've seen longer queries, but giving too much information is sometimes as bad as not giving enough information.)

Before I give you my outline method for summarizing your book, I'd like to make one quick, albeit extremely important, point.

The query letter is separate and apart from your synopsis and the two should not be confused..

If you're wondering why this is such an important point, I'll tell you this. If you spend four or five hours writing your query and you include every plot and sub-plot only to receive a "no" response in the mail less than a week later, the pain of rejection will send you to your bed for days.

The query letter is a snapshot of your novel, designed to give the editor a quick, but powerful, look at your writing ability and your topic. While I know it might not seem fair that you're judged on the query letter alone, think of the hundreds, no, thousands, of manuscripts an editor receives every year. A short, concise query letter enables an editor to see who you are, what you've written and how well you've written it without spending an hour reading a five page missive.

So how do you sum up an entire novel without losing your sanity? Imagine a friend asking you to describe the masterful novel you've just written. If you begin to expound on each and every plot line, odds are good your friend's eyes will start to cross before you reach point number two.

So don't tell them. Show them with a few simple, yet powerful words. Listen to the trailers for movies. The announcer (in that deep, ominous bass voice) usually sums up the movie in one enticing sentence. Very quickly, you can determine whether or not the movie interests you. Think of your summary paragraph as your movie trailer. Written well, the summary will entice the editor to choose your manuscript over your competition's work.

I use a four ingredient recipe for summing up my novel.

Identify the conflict.
Identify the main characters.
Keep the summary active.
Leave the editor wanting more.

Okay, it's time to exercise that creative muscle. Pick two of your favorite novels and write the summary for them. Limit yourself to no more than two paragraphs. Don't worry about how long it takes you. Summarizing gets easier over time.

Now read your paragraphs aloud. Is your conflict defined? Are the main characters clearly identified? Did you use active verbs or passive? Did you show the editor a brief glimpse of each story or did you just tell him/her about it?

You want your summary to reach out and touch the editor. You want it to scream, "HEY, TAKE A LOOK AT ME!" But most of all, you want it to capture and hold the editor's attention.

Take, for example, the following summary of my novel, [Why Doesn't Mommy Love Me?](#)

My mother has never told me she loves me. When I turned ten, I stopped asking for her love. I just want to survive long enough to escape. My name is Sarah, and I am an abused child.

[Why Doesn't Mommy Love Me?](#) takes the reader on a short, albeit powerful, journey through the life of an abused child. Sarah's struggles, though fictional, give a traumatic snapshot of the horrors of child abuse and one little girl's amazing will to succeed in spite of her past.

It may take some practice before you feel confident your summary says what you need it to say, but the first time you catch an editor's eye, the exhilaration will be worth all of your time and energy.

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Lesson 3: SO YOU HATE TO WRITE A SYNOPSIS

Most people do, but this lesson will show you a quick, efficient way of writing the most important book report of your life. In this lesson, we'll cover...

Seeing the synopsis through the eyes of a reader
How you should really view a synopsis
Don't dread it, anticipate it
Taking that first step
Outlining your manuscript
Letting the book do the talking
Fresh and innovative vs. old and tiresome
How much is too much or how little is too little

A View is Worth A Thousand Words

As writers, we've conditioned ourselves to believe the synopsis is a step to be dreaded, avoided even. We write our books with excitement, eager to reach the final climax, only to realize that, to our horror, we now have to write a synopsis if this manuscript is ever to see the light of day.

We see the synopsis as a burden, a relentless task which must be accomplished if our manuscript is to ever have a chance at publication. Additionally, in the back of our minds, even though we'd never admit it aloud, we think the synopsis is a torture tool the editors use to separate the wheat from the chaff. While the synopsis is, indeed, a tool, it is not intended for torture, but for revelation.

As I mentioned earlier in this course, the synopsis is the window to your manuscript. It lets the editor see in through the blinds and examine your talent, your dedication, and your imagination. Hopefully, by the time we reach the end of this lesson, you'll be ready to sit down at your computer and tackle that synopsis with excitement, knowing it could put your manuscript in an editor's hands and your book on the shelves of every popular bookstore in America.

Outlines and Strategies

You have three hundred or more typewritten pages, at least ten chapters, maybe more, maybe less, and now you have to explain your manuscript to an editor. You'll probably be surprised to hear that I don't go by strict, detailed outlines to prepare my synopsis. In the past, I relied upon a structured outline to make sure I included every necessary point and character. Now, I rely on my chapters. Sound confusing? It's not. Let me explain.

If each of your chapters do what they're supposed to do and contribute to your story, then they contain necessary points to include in your manuscript. I've heard that you should write one synopsis page for every 10,000 words, but I don't adhere to that strict formula. I just write the synopsis, and to date, I've never had an editor tell me it was either too long or too short. I believe the synopsis should be as long or as short as it takes to give the editor the information he/she is looking for. The question is, how do you determine how much is too much or how little is too little? There is no pat answer to this question, but I have my own methods which I will gladly share with you.

First, if you've recently read your manuscript (which needs to be done before you even begin tackling the synopsis), then you should be familiar enough with your chapters to write down the main points of each. I suggest listing at least three main points for each chapter. Next, re-read the points and see if any of them could be combined or are similar.

For example, in my first chapter of a fantasy novel I recently completed, one of my main points was the instant attraction/connection between the hero and heroine. Later on, in chapter two, I expounded on that attraction even more but I included an element of unease on behalf of the heroine. While the two points are similar, I didn't feel it was as important to include the attraction in my main point list in Chapter One. There is such a thing as overdoing the information. Does it really matter if it was instantaneous? I didn't think so. Therefore, I made mention of the attraction in the first part of my synopsis, but I went into greater detail later on when I included the additional feelings the heroine faced. That saved me from having to write an entire paragraph based on the attraction alone in Chapter One.

Third, write one paragraph about each of the main points once you've weeded through them. Most synopses start with a hook. Just as I mentioned in Lesson Two, the hook is your strongest marketing tool. You catch not only an editor's eye but his/her attention. So how do you figure out the best hook for your story? Here's your exercise for the next ten minutes. That's all the time you have. Don't give yourself any more because you don't want to spend too much time dreaming up your hook. If it hasn't come to you within a few seconds, move on and come back to it later. Ready?

List five of your favorite movies. Try to insert a mixture of drama, action, adventure, and comedy, but if the only type of movie you like is a good western, then, just list five favorite westerns. After your list is prepared, set your microwave timer or your alarm clock for ten minutes. What you need to do is come up with an opening hook for each of those movies. This task shouldn't be too difficult if these really are your favorite movies. Here's an example:

Engaged to a man she could never love, Rose is surprised to find herself attracted to a vagabond aboard a doomed luxury cruise ship.

I'll give you two guesses to determine the name of the movie. If you guessed "The Titanic," you would be correct. See how easy it is? Now you try. Here's a tip, too. Your opening hook can very well be your log line, especially if it's strong enough.

Once I've determined my hook, written my main points and my paragraphs, it's time to assemble the pieces of the puzzle and begin writing the synopsis.

Creating the Puzzle

Let's list the steps to assembling a synopsis. It'll make it easier and give you a checklist to go by.

Determine your hook.

List at least three major points for each chapter of your book.

Determine if any of the points are unnecessary or redundant.

Write a paragraph about each main point.

Determine your ending.

The last step is a new one but just as important as the opening hook. You want to leave the editor with a feeling of completion. Do not, under any circumstances, allude to a major plot point which you've neglected to include or end the synopsis with a question or without a wrap up. Your synopsis is the book report of your manuscript. It needs to tell all without being too verbose. I would imagine the next question would be, how do I do that? If you're ready to start putting together your puzzle, let's get started.

Take a look at the paragraph I've written below:

Hailey Armstrong's life hangs in the balance. **(opening hook and first major point in Chapter One)**She has no where to go and doesn't have a dime to her name to get her to safety. Forced to place her trust in a stranger's hands, she agrees to accompany the lanky cowboy to Colorado Territory. **(second major point in Chapter One)**That is her first mistake. Her second is ignoring her instincts, that nagging voice, barely above a whisper, which warns her of danger. **(third major point in Chapter One)**

Not every chapter will have three major plot points. Maybe your chapters only focus on one aspect of the plot. Whatever works for you in your writing will work for you in the synopsis. If you have ten chapters, each with one major point, you'll have a ten-to-twelve paragraph synopsis, including your ending chapter(s). Note I said ending chapter(s). You may end your synopsis with as many paragraphs as it takes to wrap up the story; however, I wouldn't suggest going over three.

It may take you some time to determine your major points, especially if you're used to reading your chapters as a part of the entire book. You may need to read a chapter, outline the major three points, and then move on to the next chapter instead of reading the entire book and being able to list the major points. That's not the end of the world. It's not about how fast you write the synopsis; it's about how well you write it.

So you've determined your opening hook, written your chapters, and now you're ready to create the synopsis. What's next? Organizing and tightening your paragraphs. Read the above

sample paragraph again. Would it have made sense if I'd put the third major point of Chapter One before the first? And what about the major points for the remaining chapters? Are they in the proper order? Does each paragraph neatly segue into the next? If not, you may have some trimming to do.

One quick, though necessary lesson: In determining whether or not a point qualifies as major, you need to ask yourself a couple of questions: Is what happened necessary to the continuance of the story? If I were to remove this point, would it drastically change the story? For example, if I were to remove the fact that Hailey placed herself in the cowboy's hands, would it drastically change the story? Absolutely. It's a necessary inclusion because it creates the element of danger I need to continue building the story.

The final piece of the puzzle takes us back to the ending. How do you wrap up the synopsis? I always use the ending scene of my novel. Sound simple? That's exactly how it should be. Although the above paragraph is taken from an historical novel of mine which hasn't been completed, I have already formatted the ending scene in my mind. To that end, I can write the ending paragraph as such:

Hailey doesn't know why she's had to endure the traumas of her past, or even if she'll face more danger in her future. For now, Jack loves her...and that's enough. He saved her, promised he'd never leave her, and she believes him.

A satisfactory ending scene leaves the editor feeling sated and content. Moreover, it makes him/her want to request the novel to see if it lives up to the extraordinary synopsis you've provided.

Now that you have the tools I use, I hope you will put them to use and that they work as well for you as they have for me. Happy Writing!

About the Author

Dawn Rachel Carrington is a published author of contemporary, fantasy and paranormal romances. She currently writes for Ellora's Cave and Five Star/Gale and previously participated in a charity anthology with such best-selling authors as Susan Grant, Mary Janice Davidson, and Patricia Rice.

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