

How to Write a Synopsis for submission to a publisher

The first version of this document was an informal guide to a prospective author written for a friend by Carl French.

Although its original purpose was to help an author get his non-fiction book accepted by a publisher it also highlights what an author needs to think about in planning and preparing a commercially viable book.

The document has since been revised, extended and updated.

This guide aims to help you prepare a synopsis for submission to any publisher, not just the Endless Bookcase. Publishers often have their own required format for a synopsis so you may need to do a redraft for each submission you make.

Let's get a few things straight before we begin. There is a significant difference between a synopsis written for a non-fiction book and one written for a work of fiction. Both cases are covered here.

Most publishers require or expect a synopsis to be supplied by any author or agent making a submission to them about a proposed book.

Also, a synopsis can be a very helpful tool for an author when writing a book so I would strongly recommend producing a draft synopsis early in the planning and writing process.

As you will see below, a good synopsis has a number of items within it. If you are writing a non-fiction work try to produce answers to all the questions posed below. If you are writing a work of fiction you only need to address those questions that are applicable. That means you may have less points to cover for fiction but there is one more important thing to do for fiction and that is the core of your synopsis. *You need to produce a clever summary of what your fiction book is about which is both a substitute for reading it and an encouragement to do so at the same time.*

Once an author of fiction has a manuscript completed, publishers are often more interested in the synopsis than a manuscript because it is a quick way to filter out unsuitable works.

So, what about the non-fiction synopsis? All I can do is tell you what I found best when I was on the receiving end as a commissioning editor, and what I found worked when I was an author. The synopsis can also be used by the commissioning editor to filter out the rubbish but if a publisher asks for a synopsis having already seen material they are interested and want to get enough of an idea to be able to decide whether or not to proceed. However, don't be surprised if after submitting a synopsis you are then asked for a table of contents and sample chapter, and maybe some more stuff. And all that will probably precede a contract.

Now for some concrete recommendations. Let's see...

- Try to keep the synopsis to under 2 pages but if possible also send a table of contents and a sample chapter.
- I'd attempt to sum up the book (tone and content) in the first paragraph and then use the rest of the space to amplify that. So for example you could start with something like "*Title of your book*" by ***your name*** explains.....
(Authors get hung up on titles (they are important of course) but a working title is all you need – although a subtitle is always useful and I'd recommend that you have one.)
- Answer these questions in your synopsis, not necessarily in this order
 - What is the book about?
 - What genre is it and what 3 classifications might it come under.

- Why it's timely? – Explain, but avoid making it sound like it will date fast.
- How does it convey its message?– structure, sequence, style etc
- Who should read it? Who else should read it? Why does it have broad appeal and relevance? (Publishers love that)
- What is the book's main message?
- Why is the author able to give such a unique and authoritative account?
- Maybe... mention the competition (preferably best sellers) and how this covers what they have missed – or is out of date about them. *Note that publishers have portfolios of books so if your book fills a gap it will be of more interest than if it might compete with one of their existing titles.*
- Make sure you get these right...
 - Demonstrate you can write and can produce well-edited and checked content.
 - Preferable show something of your own style.
 - Write your synopsis in the third person as if you are a sympathetic, enthusiastic but objective reviewer– no I's or we's "The book covers..."
 - Get the spelling and grammar right and keep it simple – make sure you get it checked – I'm useless at proof reading but even good checkers can easily miss things.
 - Be very careful about cultural issues and terms – I don't mean political correctness although these days some publishers do impose their own political values in a heavy-handed way and you may wish to avoid them. I actually mean examples such as "I was stumped" which is a cricketing term that means absolutely nothing to a North American reader.
 - Include something to show you are an expert and professional, but avoid jargon.
 - Avoid clichés like the plague (sorry couldn't help that).
 - Include something to show it's well researched and up to date.
 - If you've not yet drafted a table of contents (I would) then at least convey something about the sequence and flow. Incidentally, you might find it useful to produce a mind map of what's in the book.
 - Try to indicate a level of entertainment or humour is present as well as content.
 - Be very clear in your own mind what kind of book it is – a "How to" book implies something very different from a "How I got the T-shirt" book.
 - Use your own expertise and experience in writing this.
- Get a few trusted people to review it before you submit it – and ask them to tell you afterwards what struck them about it.
- If possible, supply supportive reviews about the draft manuscript and any independent opinion about the merits of the book.

Well, I've run out of steam now so I hope that's enough to get you started and hasn't put you off!

Good luck!

Carl

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Footnote

Traditionally, publishers have had a very difficult job to do. Speculatively producing thousands of books in the hope that they will sell them needs judgement but overall is a game of “win some lose some” where good judgement improves the odds but does not guarantee success.

Now in the age of the ebook and print on demand (PoD) some of these historic challenges don't necessarily apply for publishers that adopt this modern approach. For example, if books don't sell there is no expensive stock left sitting in the warehouse or on the shelves.

The Endless Bookcase uses PoD or low volume print runs but many conventional publishers, especially the bigger publishers, still operate a business model based on high volumes. So, they still only want to publish books with a high chance of being best sellers.

There are many specialist or “boutique” publishers that concentrate on just one genre and often have accompanying specialist sales channels, such as mailing lists. If your book is a good match for one of them then they might be your best first port of call.

Having said all of that, the creation of a successful book is a significant undertaking for which preparation and planning is vital. Therefore, writing a synopsis is a useful exercise for any author.