

# WHAT IS A SYNOPSIS? AN OUTLINE? A TREATMENT?

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## Introduction

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Funding applicants are often required to provide a variety of summary versions of their project: a one line version, a one paragraph version, a one or two page synopsis, an outline (3–8 pages) or a treatment (10–20 pages).

These notes have been prepared as a guide for applicants on the form and purpose of these short documents.

While some applicants may see the writing of these documents as an onerous duty, only to be undertaken because funding bodies require them, they are in fact enormously useful to funding bodies *and* filmmakers. They are a way of discovering and defining the fundamental essence of a project’s story. Many a project has foundered because of a weak story, or indeed no story at all. And many a project has foundered because of a flawed premise, which no amount of drafts will ever fix.

The writer acknowledges a large debt to Mr Stephen Cleary’s Arista lecture, *Short Documents*. The writer also takes responsibility for his versions of the synopses of the Australian films cited as examples.

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## Story and plot – what's the difference?

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In the finished film, story and plot become one, but in conception they are not necessarily the same thing. Plot is the means to tell the story, and may be sweeping or intricate, epic or intimate. It may be linear or play with time. It may be couched in this genre or that. The dramatic and thematic – or perhaps market – needs of the story will dictate the plot, but there has to be a strong story in the first place.

Story, as distinct from plot, is the key emotional relationships and conflicts of characters in pursuit of their goals, which develop into a series of events.

For instance, the story of *Othello* has been told as a Western (*Jubal*), the story of *High Noon* has been told as sci-fi (*Outlands*) and *Emma* has been told as a teen-pic (*Clueless*). In each case setting, mode of storytelling and even plot depart from the original version of the story, but the key emotional conflicts, moral dilemmas and themes remain the same. However, when asked "What is your story about?", many filmmakers launch into the plot – ie explaining what happens. For instance, here is a version of the plot premise of *Proof*:

Martin, a blind photographer, spurns his sexy housekeeper, Celia, who loves him. When Martin chooses kitchen hand Andy to describe his photographs – the "proof" of Martin's existence – a triangular struggle begins...

The plot premise is an ideal hook. It can be suggestive, intriguing, exciting and create that very necessary curiosity about 'what happens next'.

But *Proof* also has a thematic premise – that is, what it is 'about': trust. We can do no better than to quote the poster for the movie:

Before love comes trust, and before trust, comes proof.

This formulation may be more abstract, less intriguing and less of a hook, but it gives us the proposition that the story dramatises; it dictates what happens, what is included (and excluded) and it keeps the story and the plot on track.

It is essential to have some notion of what theme or proposition the story dramatises, or the argument the whole story demonstrates and therefore 'proves'. It is the filmmakers' reason for telling the story and it is a way of convincing others that the story is worth telling.

Conversely, a strong, noble or worthy premise alone will not save or justify a weak story.

Whether or not filmmakers disclose their thematic premise, it is always useful to know what it is – that is, what their story is 'about' – when writing a one paragraph summary, an outline, a synopsis, a treatment, or even the script.

# Synopses

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## The one sentence synopsis

Applicants/filmmakers are often asked to supply a one sentence version of their film story. This one sentence should give the most concentrated version possible of the story, or at least its key event.

For example, here is a one sentence plot premise for *Somersault*:

A teenage girl runs away from home, hoping to find herself through love, but the people she meets are as lost as she is...

This sentence is one way to describe what happens in *Somersault*. In this case, it gives us the starting event, implies further events and states the protagonist's predicament.

## The one paragraph synopsis

The one paragraph synopsis is useful in finding the essence of the story because it must state very briefly and simply WHO, WHAT and HOW.

Within the space of two to four sentences, the one paragraph synopsis should set out whose story it is (the protagonist), what his or her problem is, what they do about it and the outcome.

For example, here is a one paragraph synopsis of *The Boys*:

Brett Sprague is released from gaol and returns home to a family he feels has disintegrated in his absence. His attempts to dominate his brothers, his brothers' girlfriends, his own girlfriend and his mother by violence and the assertion of masculine solidarity result in the alienation and escape of the women. Finally, Brett leads his brothers in an act of revenge on one anonymous female, the scapegoat for their failures as men.

What is implied in this synopsis of *The Boys* is not just 'what happens', but the story's thematic concerns as well.

## The 'pitch' version of the one paragraph synopsis

Some writers may choose to write their one paragraph synopsis as a structured 'pitch', which works like this:

This story is a...(romantic comedy, film noir, psychological drama, etc)

...about...(your protagonist, perhaps with an adjective or two)

...who wants/needs/sets out to... (the protagonist's problem or objective).

First major plot point of the story (ie what the protagonist does in pursuit of her/his objective).

Second major plot point of the story.

Third major plot point of the story (this might be a 'reversal' and begin with "But...").

(Note: three plot points maximum!)

The climax.

And the resolution (what the protagonist gained or lost or learnt).

For example, here is a pitch version of *Travelling North*:

This is a comedy-drama about Frances, a middle-aged widow, trapped in a wintry Melbourne granny flat and subject to the demands of her unhappy daughters. She escapes with her aging but passionate lover, Frank, and travels north to the idyllic Queensland coast. But Frank turns out to be an incommunicative curmudgeon, who has hidden a heart condition from her. Plagued with guilt about her daughters, Frances must nevertheless become Frank's nurse – with the support of the local doctor and a widower neighbour. Frances breaks through the now vulnerable Frank's shell; they find happiness at last and marry. Frank dies, and although doctor and neighbour offer themselves, Frances has found herself and is finally free: she will go on 'travelling north'.

The slightly longer pitch version has several advantages. First, it can actually be used as a pitch. Second, as a pitch it is mercifully short and avoids the MEGO (Mine Eyes Glaze Over) factor. Third, success or failure can be gauged at once by whether or not listeners to the pitch are hooked and ask questions. It also forces the storyteller to define just what their story is.

Writers of the ensemble piece (eg *Lantana*) may struggle with this form. In such cases, where the subject is a group, the emphasis should be on what the members of the group have in common (in the case of *Lantana*, loneliness and thwarted love). Similarly, writers of the complex caper or crime pic (eg *Two Hands*) can rely, in their one paragraph, on the fact that it is still somebody's story, that somebody has a problem and they better do something about it.

### **The one page synopsis**

The generally accepted idea of a synopsis is a one – or at most two – page document. ('One page' really does mean one page. Noone is fooled by attempts to squeeze more onto a page by using a compressed font in 10 point with no paragraph breaks.)

Like the one paragraph synopsis, the one page synopsis deals in WHO, WHAT and HOW, but also establishes the other major characters and their lines of conflict, what is at stake for these characters, the setting in time and space, and the major turning points of the story. The last is crucial; the key element of any synopsis is a clear indication of the story's structure. That is, how the story begins, develops and ends. The synopsis must reveal the end if only to convince readers that there is one and that it is a logical, dramatic outcome of all that comes before. Although the one page synopsis is a selling document, it is not a teaser. It should not end in three dots... It should tell the complete story, *not* simply posit a premise that leaves readers wondering 'what happens next'. Above all, what needs to be stimulated in the reader is not mere curiosity about 'how the story turns out', but an excitement about the possibility of this story as a movie.

To summarise, the one page synopsis must include: the *event*, without which the story would not begin; the decisions and actions the characters make in pursuit of their goals; the obstacles and barriers they encounter and what they do about them; whether they win or lose; and where we leave them in the end.

Despite its very compressed form, the synopsis does give the reader a sense of the characters because it includes their key choices and actions. And in a drama, choices and actions define character.

Finally, screen drama (and we include documentary here) demands a story which develops in a cause-and-effect way. The reader of the one page synopsis will want to see that the story develops and builds with rising tension, ever more loaded conflict and something of value riding on the outcome.

## The drama outline

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The outline is a document of three to eight pages. It expands the one page synopsis to acknowledge motive, demonstrate cause and effect and show the flow of the narrative as it will be told on screen. As such, the outline places a greater demand on the writer's storytelling skills.

In writing the outline, it may be helpful to think not just of 'acts', but of 'blocks' of action. To present this idea graphically, imagine the narrative line of the whole story as a horizontal line, or, if you prefer, a rising curve.

Along this line, sequences or blocks of action play, one after another, each one building on the one before and leading (in a chain of cause and effect) to the next. If you have made a scene list (see below), it should be possible to bracket runs of scenes together into blocks and label them in terms of what they achieve.

For example, here is a version of *Proof* seen in this way, remembering that a block could be a single, crucial scene or a whole sequence.

- Block 1: Flashback: Martin the blind child. Establish mistrust.
- Block 2: Adult Martin, the photographer; his normal world; intro Andy & Celia.
- Block 3: Chance meeting: Martin and Andy take the cat to the vet and bond.
- Block 4: Martin rejects Celia's sexual overtures.
- Block 5: Andy describes Martin's photographs and invites Martin to the drive-in.
- Block 6: Friendship sealed: the drive-in and after.
- Block 7: Celia learns she has a rival for Martin.
- Block 8: Andy meets sexy Celia and lies to Martin.
- Block 9: Celia ups the stakes: she blackmails Martin into going to a concert.
- Block 10: Martin rejects Celia again.
- Block 11: Celia seduces her rival Andy.
- Block 12: Flashback: Martin's Mother dies.
- Block 13: Martin finds out the truth about Andy and Celia.
- Block 14: Andy realises that Celia loves Martin.
- Block 15: Martin fires Celia.
- Block 16: Martin and Andy reconcile.

Obviously, this is a very broad-strokes way of describing the story; it does not cover every single scene, and the shooting script's structure is more intricate.

Nevertheless, it does indicate the overall structure and the cause and effect build.

In this way, an outline for *Proof* could be 16 paragraphs, which would also include reference not just to 'what' but to 'why' and 'how' – ie the characters' motives and the reason one action causes the reaction it does, leading in turn to the next, and so on. In compressing 90–120 minutes of screen story into 3–8 pages, there is no room for detail; what must be clear is the dramatic purpose and function of each block in relation to the overall story intention.

## **The scene breakdown vs the one liner scene list**

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The use of the scene breakdown, as a public document, is nowadays confined to series and serial television. There it is either a preliminary, interim version of the series or serial episode, written by the writer after a plotting meeting, or a straight-out instruction to the writer, prepared by the show's script department.

The scene breakdown, with its reported speech and detailed business, must be the most boring literary form ever invented. However, a scriptwriter is well advised to prepare what we usually call a 'one-liner scene list'. This is an essential preparatory internal document. (It is what US textbooks call a 'beat sheet' and the British call a 'step outline'.) The scene list is the ideal way to check structure – ie that scenes are in the right order – and to eliminate repetitions, red herrings, dead ends or otherwise pointless scenes.

Scriptwriters may choose to go beyond the scene list and into more detail for their own benefit (and some scriptwriting gurus advise it). But ideally the one-liner scene list actually has *two* lines per scene: one which says what happens and another which says what the scene is about – ie its significance or point. Some people choose to put their one-liners on filing cards: a good idea because they can then be shuffled around.

If it is difficult to describe a scene in two sentences, there is a good chance the scene will be difficult to write, because it is unfocussed and of muddy purpose. And a scene which is difficult to write is probably a bad scene.

There is another practice in series and serial television worth mentioning here: the writing of character profiles. The purpose of these is usually as short cut help for actors and directors during casting. Again, these profiles may be a useful way for the writer to explore characters' backgrounds and motives.

How much of this exploration will find its way into the script in the service of the story is another matter. Character exploration (or explanation) for its own sake usually results in illustration and the story marking time.

In any case, it goes without saying that in the treatment, the script or on screen, the character needs to emerge from what he or she says and does. The audience will not be issued with character profiles on their way into the theatre.

## The drama treatment

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The treatment, as the term suggests, sets out the dramatic and cinematic way you intend to 'treat' the story in terms of style and unfolding narrative. It's generally a 10–20 page document (although for a short drama it would be shorter). Its preparation should be greatly aided by the documents described above – including the 'one-liner scene list'.

The treatment required for a drama project is, like the outline, a 'selling' document, but not a hyped-up teaser. It should convince a reader that there is a cinematic story and that the writer has a firm grasp of the story and its telling. As a longer document, the treatment will also include any subplots, indicating how they integrate, and reverberate, with the main plot.

For example, here is a version of a portion of a treatment for *Lantana*:

When Leon gets home – late – he is guilty and anxious. He lies about where he's been. Sonya knows something is wrong – and he knows she knows – but she says nothing. Next morning, Leon is out jogging, driving himself, proving that he does not have a bad heart – or perhaps courting disaster. He runs smack into another man – a stranger. Leon abuses him, but then is shocked when the man cowers and weeps. At home, hurt and smeared with the other man's blood, Leon cannot bring himself to describe this glimpse of male vulnerability; he lies to Sonya, claiming he fell.

At work, he lies to Claudia too: he says he hit his head on the clothesline. Claudia makes it very clear that she won't cover for Leon with Sonya again. Exasperated (and lonely herself), she berates him for putting his marriage in jeopardy.

Meanwhile, Valerie has another session with her patient Patrick. She has difficulty remaining objective and finds his description of his gay lover's wife disturbing. She finds herself identifying with this woman and compelled to defend her... Later, she tries to broach her uneasy feelings to John, but he blocks discussion, guesses that Valerie is judging Patrick and advises referral to another therapist...

What this example attempts to show is a portion of a story with multiple 'points of view' (POV) and thematically linked, parallel strands. (In the script for *Lantana*, the stories are even more fragmentary and interwoven than here, but this is a treatment, not a script.)

In a treatment version of a story with multiple strands or subplots, it is perfectly legitimate to use such terms as "Meanwhile..." or "At the same time..." or "On the other side of town..." to indicate a transition to another strand or subplot.

There are standard definitions of what a treatment is, such as: "the telling of the story in the present tense, in a cinematic way – that is, confining the telling to only what can be seen and heard."

Not necessarily so, and the trap with such a definition is that it leads the treatment writer to write something that looks, and reads, like a scene breakdown.

A level of detail that includes reported speech, location descriptions etc is neither required nor productive in a treatment. There isn't the space and such things may actually impede a reader's grasp of the story by bogging down the narrative sweep. Although the treatment is longer than the outline, it still *suggests* the movie, compressing 90–120 minutes of screen time into 10–20 pages.

However, because a treatment is a prose summary of the film's story, it is quite legitimate to state motive and describe thoughts and emotions. In the screenplay and the movie, of course, these things must be inferred from what is seen and heard.

So, detail within scenes and dialogue are to be avoided. The latter can be avoided fairly easily; what's wanted in the treatment is the intent of what the characters say, or what their dialogue will achieve.

For example, here is a version of a key development in *Proof* in treatment form:

As a test, Martin asks Andy to describe his latest batch of photographs – which Martin labels with stickers in Braille. Andy's descriptions are pithy and amusing – with a tinge of cynicism, which Martin finds congenial. Martin is still guarded, but he is beginning to trust his new friend. To Martin's surprise, one photograph is of Celia. Martin is dismissive, even cruel, about his housekeeper, but he can't see that Andy is intrigued and attracted. Enjoying his role, Andy takes it further: he will describe moving pictures to Martin – at the drive-in.

Note how, in this example, there is no description of the setting, because it is not important to the story. Characters' motives, however, are made clear. Andy's descriptions of Martin's photographs are not reported; rather it is the nature of the descriptions and how they develop the relationship between the characters that is important. One detail – Celia's photograph – is included because it is a key set-up and hints that Andy may not be as trustworthy as Martin thinks.

'Zinger' lines of dialogue are almost always a guess and, nine times out of ten, don't survive when put in a dramatic context. Great movie lines (eg "Play it, Sam", "Nobody's perfect", "That'll be the day", "What we have here is a failure to communicate", or even, "No, we're not satisfied – mate!") are great because of their context.

As for detail, the more complex the plot, the more there will be an obligation to go into detail – otherwise the plot just isn't going to make sense. A funding body's readers will acknowledge the necessity of the treatment explaining things in more detail for the sake of clarity. Try writing a treatment for a film like *Kiss Or Kill* without going into detail.

Nevertheless, the more 'explaining' that's included, the more mechanical or technical detail, the more the story calls attention to itself as a construct. Although the treatment will be read by seasoned professionals, they too want to be engrossed in the story.

Furthermore, because the treatment must present a structured story, as a story, all the flaws in it are going to be more evident and glaring than in the script itself. In the script, the reader may be beguiled by the saving grace of a beautifully written scene of witty repartee, or an action-packed heist, or an erotic encounter. In the treatment, these will be present only in so far as they are events in the developing narrative.

Numerous screenwriters say they hate writing treatments, and they are difficult, but the source of the difficulty in writing a solid treatment may be the screenwriter not knowing what their story is.

The considered treatment, wherein story problems are genuinely confronted, makes the writing of the script far, far easier. When the story and its meaning are clear in the filmmakers' minds, as shown in the treatment, the script itself should be a matter of craft.



## The one sentence and one paragraph synopsis for documentary

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### 'True' isn't good enough

Although the notes above should be helpful for documentary applicants, the one sentence and one paragraph synopses for a documentary differ slightly from those for a drama. The key difference is that the one sentence and one paragraph synopses for a documentary are statements of intent. (See below.)

For example, here is a one sentence synopsis of *Molly and Mobarak*:

A young Afghan refugee finds love in a small country town divided by race.

And here is a one paragraph synopsis of the same documentary:

Twenty-two year old Mobarak works in the Young abattoir with 90 other Afghani refugees. Befriended by a local family, Mobarak falls in love with the daughter, Molly, a teacher. But with his Temporary Protection Visa running out and the future uncertain, Mobarak is fearful of being returned to his village in Afghanistan. Molly and Mobarak's burgeoning relationship is set against the racial tensions, resurgent after the Bali bombing, of a small community.

And how does the story turn out? What happens to Mobarak? The filmmaker doesn't know: he'll find out – and then we will. What his one paragraph synopsis tells us is that there is a story here and that, in a study of one relationship, far wider significance is implicit.

Here is a one sentence synopsis of *Facing The Music*:

Professor Anne Boyd is fighting to save her university music department and it's going to take more than a miracle.

A one paragraph synopsis for the same documentary:

In the halls of Sydney University's Music Department, talented young students create sublime music in a setting that is far from serene. After nearly a decade of relentless government funding cuts, Professor Anne Boyd struggles to preserve basic standards. But Boyd is an innocent when it comes to harsh economic realities and the very qualities that are her strengths as a composer and teacher – her passion and dedication – leave her vulnerable. Forced to cut staff and courses and pick up the phone to plead for private sponsorship, the usually conservative Boyd is forced to fight for what she believes in. How long can she continue?

Again, with this example, we learn WHO, WHAT and HOW, but not the outcome. At the same time, however, this synopsis implies that more is at stake than Professor Boyd herself: a whole university department and its talented students are on the line.

The one sentence and one paragraph synopses for a documentary should indicate not only the subject, but the filmmakers' intended interpretation of that subject and its wider significance. That is, any documentary synopsis should not rely on claims of 'inherently interesting' or (merely) 'true'. Even the most dramatic or controversial subject matter is vulnerable to the response, 'Yes, but so what?' A documentary is not an item on the nightly news.

## The documentary outline, or proposal

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The outline for a documentary differs (again) from a drama outline in that it explicitly (rather than implicitly) takes the form of a proposal, although it must still fulfil the demand of telling the reader WHO, WHAT and HOW.

In a drama production, the creative elements are more or less under control. With a documentary, unless all the materials already exist (in say, photographs, maps and archival footage) and the filmmakers have seen them, the proposal is somewhat more speculative.

The documentary film has multiple agendas, which should be reflected in the proposal. The proposal will tell the story of the proposed film, making clear who it is about and how the story will be told. It will make clear that the film intends to explore an issue and what that issue is. How will the film do that? The film will deliver an argument. How? With what style or method?

In making the film, the filmmaker will find and use new resources to tell the story, or reuse old resources in a new way. The proposal states what those resources are and how will they be deployed. It also describes how the film will show the audience something new, even on a subject the audience already knows something about. Among other things, the proposal sets out what you want to do before you really know if you can.

Even so, it must convince the reader that there is a story within the material. The proposal must show that there is a narrative, which can be extracted from or imposed on this factual material. It must show that the filmmakers have access to their characters and, especially, to the resources necessary to make the film, and suggest how those resources will be used to tell the story.

Ideally, the documentary film will reverberate beyond its specifics. For example, *Molly and Mobarak* tells a 'love story', but has far wider implications in illustrating and questioning government policies on asylum seekers. The narrative of *After Mabo* questions the whole history of race relations in Australia. The story of one professor of music in *Facing the Music* raises issues about the purpose and funding of any university department today.

The proposal, then, should state why this subject matters to the filmmaker and why the filmmaker believes it will matter to an audience.

The trap with a documentary proposal is that it can look like a lecture justified by worthy intentions – and the fact that it's factual or 'true'. In other words, what the audience *should* know, rather than what it wants to know. The way to avoid this trap is to discover the potential of the story as a narrative.

Who is the protagonist/hero/heroine? Who or what are they up against? What is the conflict and what is at stake? WHO, WHAT and HOW.

## The documentary treatment

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The documentary treatment, like the drama treatment, tells the story of the film as you plan to have the audience experience it, either stating or implying the style in which it will be treated/told.

But since documentaries may utilise a wide variety of resources not used in a straight drama, the documentary treatment should specify these, eg interviews, reconstructions, archival footage, photographs, maps, diagrams, graphics, etc.

As an example here is a portion of the treatment for *Eternity*:

Ruth Ridley is the strong and feisty daughter of the preacher John Ridley. She sits in the studio before a beautiful, stylised landscape of a sea at sunset. She explains the influence her father had on Arthur Stace, who was later to become known as 'Mr Eternity'. A photograph of John Ridley appears. It was Ridley's sermon, 'Echoes of Eternity', which supposedly converted Stace to Christianity in the 1930s. It was after this sermon that Stace took a piece of chalk from his pocket and wrote, in beautiful copperplate script on the sidewalks of Sydney, the one word that would influence many for the next four decades: 'Eternity'.

The image of Arthur Stace appears, recreated, as he walks away from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, wearing a dark coat and Depression-era hat. 1920s archival footage of two male swimmers, seen from overhead, lying on a cliff face. The turbulent sea hits the cliff as the sea runs over their bodies. John Ridley's poetic sermon booms loudly as the sea returns to hit the cliff face and the swimmers hold on tightly.

The experienced reader can infer at once the resources to be utilised by this filmmaker: research, interviews, photographs, voice over narration, aural recreation, graphics, dramatic reconstruction and archival footage.

If it is essential to include background material on the subject or characters, and evidence of your access to them, do so in a separate document, so as to preserve the narrative flow of the treatment itself.

Funding bodies and broadcasters recognise that in the case of some documentary projects – observational or *verite* films for instance – it is impossible to write a detailed treatment. In such cases, the full burden rests on the outline, or proposal (see above), which must convince the reader of the potential of the story and provide evidence that the filmmakers have or can gain access to the subject(s) and the resources necessary to make the film.

A scene or a sequence in a drama film, given adequate resources and competence, will be realised more or less as written. The making of a documentary, however, may involve the elements of discovery and even surprise.

The documentary treatment, therefore, like other synopses, is a statement of intent. It is a description of the film you *want* to make and think you can, given what you know and what you have access to when the filming begins. With a drama, it is said that the final draft is written in the edit suite; with a documentary this is literally true.

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