

Scripting The Synopsis

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Here are some valuable tips to helping scribes create a well-constructed synopsis.

Chocolates can be nice. Flowers brighten one's day and usually summon happy feelings. Various tokens of affection are always appreciated. Perhaps a monetary bribe will do the trick.

Screenwriters may feel the need to resort to various schemes to get their synopsis read by the Hollywood reader, but the truth is, the writing will always speak for itself. The solution lies not in dreaming up imaginative ways to coerce and smooth talk a reader, but to craft a cohesive, persuasive synopsis that will leave them itching to send your masterpiece on to the powerful Hollywood player they work for.

A synopsis is a brief summary of a script written in a few paragraphs, including only a general outline of events. It's also defined as a one-half to two-page description of a story, written in prose form, generally with little or no dialogue. A synopsis must always include the script's logline at the top of the page.

Synopsis readers are famously known in the industry as the gatekeepers. Occasionally called story analysts, readers assist the studio, producer, agent, etc. who is far too busy to go through the mountains of material they receive. The reader's job is to comb through synopses and produce coverage. Coverage includes a description of the main action of the story, the reader's comments on the story, and occasionally a character breakdown. At the end of the coverage the reader will assign a fairly self explanatory "Recommend, Consider or Pass."

A synopsis is a selling tool, and a reader assigning a Recommend, perhaps even a Consider, is a huge step forward in igniting a screenwriting career. Therefore, to uncover the secrets of creating a successful synopsis, we turn to a gatekeeper.

Josh Gompper is an executive assistant at Niad Management. Niad Management represents directors and writers and works with about 15 to 18 of these clients. Gompper first interned as a production assistant and was later promoted. His day-to-day activities include replying to all queries, reading all screenplays, and writing script coverage. He is clearly the definition of a gatekeeper.

To begin, Gompper stresses addressing the synopsis to an actual person.

"You should know the full name of the person in the office to address the synopsis to. Addressing it to the wrong person or starting it with Dear Sir or Madam or Attention is not good. Always do your research. Never send blind queries. Showing that you did not do any prep work reflects extremely poorly on you as a professional, on your abilities as

a writer, and your conviction to succeed in this industry.”

Gompper continued, “It should definitely present the protagonist and the protagonist’s problem, the antagonist, and I think the conclusion. The synopsis should be short and brief. Being too long is very bad ... screenwriters must remember it’s just an encapsulation of the story.”

Gompper continued his discussion on formatting. “I’d say five paragraphs is the proper length. It’s just like an essay. An introductory paragraph, introducing the hero, the problem, then maybe three paragraphs that go through the major plot points of the story. Finally, a concluding paragraph, detailing what has happened to the main character after going through the story, where he is now, and where we are at the ending.

“You really want to get a sense of why this story is different than all the other stories like it. If it’s a romantic comedy, a lot of romantic comedies follow the same formula—why should we care about your story over another that is similar?”

Gompper talked about reacting to a synopsis:

“The synopsis shouldn’t tell me whether or not it’s funny or sad, or what I’m supposed to feel about. It should strongly evoke those emotions on its own.”

He continued by emphasizing why a synopsis should be very well-written. “It’s your writing sample as far as grammar, punctuation and spelling. You could have a nice logline, an extremely compelling logline even, but the script might not be requested necessarily if the synopsis looks like it's written by a sixth-grader. Hire someone to help proofread it if you have to.

“The mistakes I see the most often are a synopsis that doesn’t have a logline. That’s something that, when I’m reading queries, that synopsis will go right to the bottom of the pile—it’s too much to read. If you have 100 queries, you just read the loglines first. If you like the logline you move forward and read through the full synopsis. If there’s no logline, it may never get read.”

Gompper offered this advice to screenwriters: “A lot of it is to just keep moving forward. If something gets in your way, just move around it. Find another way, another route. The worst thing is to give up.”

Readers don’t enjoy rejecting a synopsis. Every little “Pass” they have to dispense hurts. All readers envision finding a terrific script. With that in mind, here are some additional tips to help make a synopsis the treasure these readers hope to uncover:

- If you are having difficulty getting started, break the story down into its most simple, basic elements, in a chronological outline. From there flesh it out with important details and then use the essay structure suggested by Gompper.
- A catchy opening can go a long way. Hopefully the logline will impress, but it’s beneficial to keep the great stuff coming. Exciting the reader bodes well for positive

coverage.

- A synopsis should always tell the story from beginning to middle to end and be written in present tense.
- Never leave out major characters or major conflicts and events, twists and turns, and especially the ending.
- The synopsis should always mimic the mood and/or tone of your script. This is extremely important if the reader is to get a true feel for your story and your writing style.
- Always play up the visual elements, as film is a visual medium. Readers always gauge the visual value in a story. They look for material that will translate well to the screen and has strong imagery.
- Express in the synopsis what is unique about the work.
- Do your homework! Only send a synopsis with a story the company you are pitching to is looking for. If a production company is looking for horror scripts, don't send a synopsis of a chick flick. Even if it's fabulous it will get tossed because of blatant ignorance, i.e., completely disregarding the intended audience's request. If you're unable to determine what types of material the company you are submitting to prefers, always send your best written, most marketable work.
- It's definitely advantageous to go through multiple drafts, and even better to test them on writing peers. Use colleagues as a sounding board, and find out what works and what doesn't and revise as necessary.

A superior or dreadful synopsis can very seriously make or break a career. It can be the difference between Spielberg getting your script or it being used by the office assistant to line the bottom of a bird cage. Devote as much time and dedication to the synopsis as you would a script. No one will ever read your script if its synopsis stinks.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Karen Ann Lefkowitz received her master's degree in communication management from the University of Southern California in May of 2004. She currently works at UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. As a freelance writer she has written art and entertainment pieces for print and online publications.

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