How to Write a Synopsis

(including the Ten Commandments of Writing)

For each synopsis assignment you will:

I. write a concise 300-400 word synopsis

II. write a one-sentence plot summary of the entire story

**Format**

All writing assignments must follow the “standard format” (see “standard format” handout). Always use proper grammar and spelling!

**I. What is a synopsis?**

When dealing with fiction, a synopsis is a concise summary or general overview of the main events of a story. At the very least a synopsis should answer the following questions:

1. Who are the main characters?

2. What is the setting (locale and time period) of the story?

3. What is the opening situation? What is going on previous to the conflict?

4. What is the central conflict (struggle between opposing forces) of the story?

5. What are the main incidents that contribute to the plot and develop the conflict?

6. What is the climax (the high point/turning point) of the story?

7. How is the central conflict resolved? What is the final outcome?

When writing a synopsis, do **NOT** give your opinion or interpretation of the story. Stick to the facts of what happened and how. Always follow the order of events as related in the story.

**II. What is a plot summary? (or “plot sentence”)**

The plot is the “soul of the story” to which all the incidents of the story relate. It consists of one principal action that includes a conflict of some sort. State the plot in a single sentence. I call this a “plot sentence.”

**The Ten Commandments of Writing**

**1. TENSE:** Write your synopsis in the present tense (He says. She walks. It smells.) After you write your rough draft, review your synopsis to make sure you have stayed in the present tense throughout!

**2. FRAGMENTS:** Write in complete sentences. Do not use sentence fragments in a synopsis!

**3. RUN-ONS:** Avoid run-on sentences. Write them properly as two sentences.

Example:

INCORRCT: Danny drove his dad’s car into a stop sign his dad was angry.

CORRECT: Danny drove his dad’s car into a stop sign. His dad was angry.

**4. SPLICE-SENTENCES:** Do not use splice run-ons. Use appropriate punctuation, e.g., a comma.

Example:

INCORRECT: Mabel wanted her husband to make a wish but he refused to do so.

CORRECT: Mabel wanted her husband to make a wish**,** but he refused to do so.

**5. DETAIL:** Do not dwell on insignificant details, especially those given on the first page of a story. By reading carefully you should be able to discern which are the most significant details that contribute to the plot of the story.

**6. PARAPHRASE:** When relating a dialogue, do **NOT** write he said, she said, and do not use quotations from the story. Paraphrase dialogues – put it all into your own words.

**7. KEEP IT SIMPLE:** Avoid frequent or repeated use of “then” or “and then.” Just tell the story.

**8. THERE IS:** Avoid beginning your sentences with “There is” or “There are.” Instead, use a strong subject and verb.

Example:

POOR: There is a family that lives on a houseboat…

BETTER: A family lives on a houseboat…

**9. TITLES:** Underline titles of full length books like novels and plays, but use quotation marks around short stories and articles.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

“The Last Lesson” by Alphonse Daudet

**10. PROOFING:** Always proofread your work. Read it out loud so that it says what you mean it to say. Make sure it is written in present tense all the way through – or points WILL be deducted from your synopsis grade. Fix all run-ons and sentence fragments. Correct all spelling and grammar errors.

[ See sample synopsis on the next two pages. This will give you an idea of what is required and expected of this assignment in length, style, and form. ]

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English 9, Mr. Rose

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**Synopsis**

The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton

**Plot Sentence** [state in one well-crafted sentence]: Two rival gangs divided by social status come to realize by the deaths of three of their friends, that their perpetual conflict is doing nothing but harming them all.

**Synopsis** [summarize the main events of the story, 400-800 words]

Ponyboy Curtis, a member of the greasers, a gang of poor East Side kids in Tulsa, leaves a movie theater and begins to walk home alone. A car follows him, and he suspects that it is filled with a bunch of Socs (pronounced “sohsh-es”), members of a rich West Side gang who recently beat up his friend Johnny. The car stops, and several Socs emerge and begin roughing Ponyboy up and try to cut off his hair. Ponyboy’s cries for help alert his brothers and fellow greasers, and the Socs flee. Afterward, Ponyboy’s older brother Darry, who is also his guardian since their parents’ death, scolds him for walking alone.

The next night, Johnny and Ponyboy go to the drive-in with fellow greaser Dally. Despite Dally’s unpleasant behavior toward two Soc girls, Ponyboy strikes up a friendship with one of them, whose name is Cherry Valance. The girls and greasers walk out of the drive-in together, and are confronted by Cherry’s boyfriend Bob and his Soc friends. Things almost come to blows, but Cherry puts a stop to the confrontation by leaving with Bob. Before going home, Ponyboy talks with Johnny in the vacant lot and falls asleep. He returns home late, and Darry gets so angry that he hits Ponyboy, who runs from the house and goes with Johnny to the park. There, they run into Bob and his Soc friends. The Socs attack, dunking Ponyboy’s head into the fountain. Johnny stabs and kills Bob. Dally helps them escape town.

The boys take refuge in an abandoned church in the countryside. There, they cut their hair to disguise themselves and then spend five days talking, smoking cigarettes, and reading from Gone with the Wind. Dally comes to visit them and, on the way back from a restaurant, they find the church in flames. Johnny and Ponyboy run inside to save a group of schoolchildren who have come to the site for a picnic. They save the children but are all injured, including Dally, and are rushed to the hospital. At the hospital, Ponyboy recognizes for the first time how much Darry really cares for him. He also learns that Dally will recover, but Johnny’s condition is extremely serious.

The next night is set for a rumble between the greasers and the Socs. Ponyboy talks with Randy, Bob’s best friend, who says that he has decided not to fight because after Bob’s death he has realized it won’t accomplish anything. Ponyboy is not feeling well, and he, too, is skeptical about the purpose of fighting, but he does participate in the rumble, which the greasers win. Afterwards, Dally and Ponyboy go to visit Johnny in the hospital, where they hear his last words: “Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold.” In despair over Johnny’s death, Dally flees the hospital, robs a grocery store, threatens the police with his unloaded gun, and gets shot dead. Ponyboy, in worse health after the rumble, is unconscious and delirious for several days.

When Ponyboy recovers, the Socs and greasers attend a court hearing. Johnny is vindicated as having acted in self-defense. However, Ponyboy is depressed, his grades begin to suffer, and he almost turns to violence. His English teacher offers him a chance to pass by writing a final essay on the topic of his choice. Back at home that night, Ponyboy examines a copy of Gone with the Wind that Johnny left him. Out of it drops a note, written by Johnny, urging Ponyboy to keep his idealism and never give up hope for a better life. Ponyboy decides to write his essay about his experiences during the last several weeks. With it, he hopes to bring attention to the plight of boys like himself and to honor the memory of the ones who died.

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