

SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Paerangi | Video 4 – Writing a Synopsis or Episode Outlines

[intro music]

One-page synopsis for short film

[0:00:07 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] A synopsis is a one-page summary, usually no more than 400 words, of all the important beats in your script. It is not a teaser, right? You don't leave things out and go, 'read on to find out what happens next'. It reveals the full story including all of the spoilers, it tells the reader exactly what happens in your screenplay. Why is this important? Well, (1) it's important for you because it's a tool for you to use when developing your script. It's a roadmap for your story. If you understand what the major beats are, then you can expand on these to write your script; but (2) it is also important for others: it is important for producers, it is important for funding bodies, anybody that you are trying to pitch your script to, and it's important to finding other crew, to finding your collaborators as well. Your synopsis is basically your written pitch and a key part of your creative materials.

Usually industry people will only read the synopsis; they won't even read your script unless they're drawn in by the synopsis. That is how important it is, so read as many synopses as you can as well.

So, how do we write a synopsis? How do we prepare to write for a synopsis? One of the things I suggest is you go back to the work you have previously completed for the tutorials, this will help you write your synopsis. Just a reminder, we looked at story development—so, theme: what is the core message you want your film to communicate? The setup: what is the establishing normal at the beginning? Inciting incident: what is the conflict? Obstacles: what are these, what are the obstacles to your protagonist's goal? Mid-point: what happens that changes the direction of your story? Climax: what is the high point of emotional and/or physical action within your story. And resolution: what is the new normal? Character, thinking about character, really understanding what that dramatic question is: what is the protagonist's dilemma? Character want: what do they want? Character need: what do they need? Obstacles: what is standing in their way, and the stakes, what is that stake? So, here you are coming full circle and you're building on what was covered in your previous tutorials, to write this one page 400 word document.

We have a checklist here in terms of thinking about your synopsis, so beginning, middle, and end, clearly defined character, you know, very brief clear descriptions, genre. It should state the time and place or give an understanding of the time and place. It should include all the important conflicts and it needs to reveal the ending—so, remember, no spoilers here. Is it visual? Does it use the present tense? Please proofread your synopsis for grammar, spelling, and format, and don't include dialogue where possible. Ask yourself as well, does it contain too much unnecessary detail? Is it an accurate account of your story? Is it easily understood? Get other people to read it to see if they can grasp what your story is about, and read as many screen synopses as you can? Watch your favourite film or read a script and write a synopsis for that script, watch a film, see if you can write a synopsis for that film.

When you start to think about how to write the synopsis, one way to look at it is to split your one page or your 400 word synopsis into four to five paragraphs. So, paragraph one will cover act one, so here you're looking at the beginning of your short film, what happens in the setup, what is the inciting incident where the conflict is introduced; that paragraph will contain that, as well as who your character is, where is your short film set. Then you have act two, two paragraphs. Act two should contain your mid-point, it should expand on the obstacles as well, and then act three, one paragraph. Here, what is the climax? You're communicating what the high point is of your script and then you're also communicating the new normal: what happens now that the character has achieved their goal?

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[0:00:07 Marina Alofagia McCartney, Screenwriter] Here we have *Vai* the title, it's a drama (the genre) about *Sevai* the protagonist, a Samoan woman. So, here we've just found out what the title is, what genre it is, and who the protagonist is, and a little bit about her. *Vai* is a drama about *Sevai*, a Samoan woman, who returns home after many years away—that is the normal. She must perform for an important village event (the inciting incident) but when she finds it difficult to connect to the performance (that's the obstacle), she must learn that her culture was never lost to her (that's the theme) or risk losing her connection to her village, her island, and her culture (those are the stakes). That is what *Sevai* stands to lose if she doesn't learn her culture is always in her bones.

This is the way that you start taking everything that you have built on, that you have worked on, to develop your story and you start to summarise it into one or two sentences. This is how you can use this to write your one page synopsis and how you can keep on going to expand on all of those beats for other creative documents.

[music]

Episode outlines for web series

[0:06:32 Emmett Skilton, Director/Producer/Writer/Actor] So, what is an episode synopsis and what is the purpose of writing an episode synopsis? Unlike a one page synopsis for a film, writing episode by episode synopses for a web series or a TV series is much more about being concise and trying to encapsulate the plot of that episode in a paragraph or two. You'll need to identify what happens in each episode, who it happens to, have an individual arc (as in a beginning, middle, and end) and also aim to serve the overall arc of the story, all while being clear and concise and trying to give enough intrigue for the reader to be excited by it. We could call these the bones of each episode, if you will.

These synopses are generally used for two reasons. The first one is to share your story with a reader—so, that could be anyone, from sharing it with a flatmate who you're keen on just bouncing some ideas off, it could be trying to seek sponsorship from someone as your work progresses, whether that be asking someone to use their space, whether it be asking someone to provide some food for you guys while you're sitting down developing the work, or it could be (which is the most important thing for me) discussing with a member of your creative team or production team the story that you're trying to tell. The second part is, you'll use these as bones from which to write your script. Having a clear episode synopsis is going to make it a hell of a lot easier to expand those into big print, story and dialogue.

So, a TV series or web series can either be following a story arc over multiple episodes, having a narrative through the entire series, or they can be standalone episodes which explore a single story in each episode that aren't connected to the previous or the next. So, when you're writing yours, this will really, really depend, but if we can look at the hypothetical story that you're telling today, is that they are a narrative through-line across the whole series, they're under five minute episodes each, and they are a single event per episode, so it's not following multiple story lines per episode. That will help with our learning.

There are also multiple elements that you want to have already established before you get to the point of writing your episode synopses. So, they are, what is the overarching story of the series? Each episode will continue that story, so not only do the episode synopses need to address the episode arc, but also the overall arc of the series. Who are the characters that the story happens to? Often when we are watching a TV show or a film it's the characters that we're invested in, and I'm sure you've already fleshed out who your character or your characters are—so, ensuring that the reader of the synopses are aware of what part of the story is happening to who, at any one time, will help them invest in that story. Why are you writing the show? So, this is a really big one for me. Knowing why you're telling the story will inform so many elements of your creative process, particularly your episode synopses. For example, with *Ackward Love*, we knew that it was about trying to represent females more accurately on screen and, in doing so, empower women, so our episode synopses would reflect some elements of plot that would meet that goal.

It's important to note that, since you've already established your tone and genre of the show, it's not that vital to try and inject that into every single episode synopsis. You will have other elements of the creative process to share that with you audience for them to understand that that's the tone of your genre.

Now let's look specifically at creating an episode synopsis. Each episode synopsis can be looked at simply, into what elements to include and also some elements to make sure you're not including because they're not necessary. The following you can use as a checklist if you wish but here are the things to include:

- Am I clear in what happens and who it happens to?
- Do I reflect a beginning, middle and end of each episode?
- Does this progress the overall story?

And then something to not include:

- Have I included any unnecessary information or dialogue?

In your episode synopses this isn't the place to try and tell a big grand story. This is not the place to share dialogue or detailed emotional exposition about how the character is feeling. It's important to write that stuff down though because that might inspire your writing later on or your scripts later on, but this is really about the bones from which to build from. Now, I have included an example page of an episode synopsis for *Ackward Love*. We took out the multiple storylines and just focused on a single storyline for this example, so you'll see the difference from our show

outline, which is example one, and the other, adapted by me, example two. This shows you how including extraneous information can actually be detrimental to the storytelling because it's not as concise, and you're elaborating on elements that don't need to be elaborated on.

It also shows how you can utilise each episode synopsis to feed into the next one and the next one and the next one, and someone reading, let's say, eight episodes, will get a full overarching story that, you've introduced the character in episode one, you've introduced who their boyfriend is in episode two, so by the time you get to episode seven, you no longer need to add these elements of saying, blah, blah, blah's boyfriend, X, because that stuff has already been mentioned in the previous, and it's extraneous information if you put it into something that's past that point.

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The first part of the homework for this video tutorial is to write a synopsis for the film Ross and Beth. Describe the beginning, middle, and end of the story, summarise the themes and the journey of the main character. The second part of the homework is to write a synopsis for your concept. This is the point where you decide whether the concept is best suited to a short film or a web series. If it is a web series, you'll need to decide how many episodes it should be and what the story and character arc is for each episode. Again, describe the beginning, middle, and end of the story, summarise the themes and the journey of the main character.