

How to write your novel synopsis

If you are entering your novel into the Brit Writers' Awards Unpublished 2010, you also need to provide the judges with a one- or two-page synopsis of your work.

So you've finished your novel and you plan to submit the first three chapters to Brit Writers. Congratulations! Completing any piece of writing is a slog – and writing a book is like running an uphill marathon with bricks in your trainers. You should feel very proud.

The hardest part is over. Now you need to 'sell' your work to our judges with a one- or two-page synopsis that gets them thinking, "Wow, I really need to read *all* of that".

Like agents and publishers (which many of them are), our judges are busy people and won't have time to read your book from start to finish. Alongside your first three chapters, they want to see a clear synopsis for the entire novel which shows that:

- a) your story hangs together;
- b) your story is well paced, with conflict and tension; and
- c) you know where your characters and plot are heading.

Indeed, one of the judging criteria for our novel category asks whether the synopsis is "useful and relevant to a potential publisher".

But how do you go about boiling your elegant literary tome or skin-prickling horror epic down into a few functional paragraphs?

What is a synopsis and why do I need one?

A synopsis is a narrative summary of your story, giving a clear overview of your main characters, plot and conflicts. It should be written in the third person, present tense ("Annabel Sparks is a pub singer with a dark secret") and bring your story to life without going into unnecessary detail. It's helpful to think of your synopsis as a selling device for your work, like the blurb on the back cover of a book.

Your synopsis is an important part of the submissions process – not just for Brit Writers but in the publishing world as a whole. Editors and agents get thousands of manuscripts every year. Usually they will look at the three chapters submitted by the author and

then, if the writing captures their interest, they will read the accompanying synopsis to see where the book is going.

Your synopsis can be the deciding factor in whether an agent accepts or rejects your life's work!

What do the Brit Writers judges expect from my synopsis?

Our judges are looking for a well-constructed summary of your novel, with paragraphs that flow logically on from one another. They don't need to know every subplot and intrigue (unless vital to the story), just the main frame on which your novel hangs.

Characters should be introduced as and when they appear in the action – not listed at the start in a roll call. You may not need to mention every character, just the main players whose actions and emotions affect the outcome of the story.

For the first mention of each character, it's good practice to put their name in capitals: 'ANNABEL SPARKS is a pub singer with a dark secret. ROGER HATCHETT is her biggest fan, but he's not as sweet and adoring as Annabel thinks...'

Your synopsis should be typed in 12pt black Arial font (just like your manuscript) and double-spaced. It should take up no more than two pages. It must cover the entire novel, including the three chapters you are submitting. You should write 'Synopsis' and the title of your novel in the top left-hand corner. (No other author details should appear here – these are stored online when you submit your work.)

How should I go about writing my synopsis?

There is no set way to write a synopsis. You may find it helpful to start crafting it during your final read-through of your novel, making notes on key scenes as you go. Later you can build on your notes, cut unnecessary details and ensure your paragraphs flow smoothly on from one another ("One hundred years before..." or "Back in the boathouse...").

The process of writing your synopsis may – and this is a bit scary – reveal structural weaknesses in your novel. Don't be afraid to return to the manuscript and re-work certain chapters. Yes, it's annoying, but trust us: your novel will be so much stronger for it.

It's always good to ask someone else to check your synopsis, which should be as polished as your manuscript.

How long should my synopsis be?

Guidelines on the length of synopses vary (always check submissions details), but we're asking you for no more than one or two pages.

Should I keep the ending a secret?

New writers often assume that agents, judges or publishers won't want to know the ending of their novel because it spoils the surprise. This is considerate but misinformed. Literary professionals aren't like the normal reading public, and they need to know that you can carry your story to a pleasing conclusion.

So don't hold back the whodunit or leave your main character dangling over the edge of a cliff! This will, at best, flag you up as a beginner and, at worst, annoy the judges.

Brit Writers synopsis checklist:

- * Will my synopsis make the judges want to read my whole novel?
- * Does it accurately map out the plot without being too wordy?
- * Have I included the ending?
- * Is it written in the third person, present tense?
- * Have I written 'Synopsis' and the title of my novel in the top left-hand corner?
- * Are the paragraphs woven skilfully together?
- * Is the synopsis one or two pages long?
- * Is each character first introduced with their name in CAPITALS?
- * Have I checked the Brit Writers submission guidelines carefully?
- * Has someone else proofread my synopsis?
- * ...Am I pleased with myself or what?!