

Story Steps

One Path to Writing a Story



Ginger Hanson

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by

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Introduction

For those of you toying with the idea of writing a short story or novel, I thought I'd share some of the steps I take before and during the time I'm writing a story. I had a page titled Story Steps on an earlier version of my website, but dropped it when I started blogging.



A few years ago, I wrote a new, improved, and expanded version for my blog *Just Ginger*

<https://ginger-hanson.blogspot.com>.

Then I thought, why not put them all together in one place?

So I did.

I hope these steps will provide you helpful ideas to use as you write.

Enjoy!

Ginger Hanson

Story Step One

Ideas: Where Do Writers Find Them?

I've often been asked, "Where do you get your ideas?"

I think writers live in a world of ideas. For me it can be an overheard comment by a stranger, something I see during a drive to the grocery store, an article in the news, a snippet of historical fact from a book, or a family crisis.

Bam! There's the germ of an idea. Notice I used the word germ.

According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, germ is an initial stage from which something may develop, i.e. the beginnings of a story.

Basically, we're looking at a starting point, but what do you do with that germ?

Well, writers have an annoying habit of asking, "what if" – what if that empty plastic bag by the side of the road contains a dead body? What if I lost my job? What if the enemy has a code no one can break?



"What if" is a magical phrase that ignites a writer's imagination. Let me show you how it works for me.

The girl friend of one of my neighbor's son ended up pregnant. They were both young and wild and doing stuff they shouldn't. Not exactly parent material. But the young man's older sister, she was married and in a stable situation. And unable to have children.

For the good of the child, the young unmarried couple asked the older married couple to adopt their child.

This situation became the germ of an idea for a novel that blossomed into *Feather's Last Dance*. Of course this germ needed lots of work because an idea needs to be big enough to keep readers (as well as the writer) interested for the duration of the novel.



Instead of a wild young boy, I thought what if the heroine is a rebellious teen who seduces the very nice boy next door?

What if she gets pregnant? What if she doesn't want to ruin his life? What if she has the baby without his knowledge. What if she gives the baby to her sister who just happens to be married to the hero's brother? What if her sister was unable to have a baby of her own?

Talk about complicating matters.

On the sad side, I had to remove their siblings in order to put the biological parents together. Now they're six years older and the hero is a conservative banker who doesn't believe the wild heroine is a suitable guardian. Probably because he discovers her fan dancing at a night club.

Now there can be a custody battle for the boy. If the hero is willing to go to court for custody of the boy he believes to be his nephew, what will he do when he discovers that boy is his son?

This is where I found the germ of an idea for a story that grew into a novel.

Story Step Two

Oh No! Not Theme

The next step I take in writing a story is to search my idea for a theme. Yeah, I know. Shudder. Shudder. The dreaded theme that we all hated having to know for literature class. I don't know about you, but my idea of the theme seldom matched the theme the teacher chose. She or he always won though because their theme would be on the test, not mine.

The whole experience made me skittish of themes.

In the early days of my writing career, there was no Internet, few writers' groups, and few writers' conferences in the rural area where I lived. Naturally, I jumped on the chance to attend a one day workshop featuring three writers in a nearby city. I'd written two novels but wasn't having any luck finding a publisher. One of the instructors (the only female) threw out the word "theme" during her presentation.

I mentally shuddered. Does she think we're in English class?

Although my first inclination was to tune her out, I was there to learn.

I listened.

She offered a whole new slant on theme. First of all, she shared its importance in storytelling. A light came on and I realized theme is one of the glues that hold a story together.

I still worried, though. How would I know a theme? Obviously, I couldn't find a theme in all those short stories, poems, essays, and novels we had to read in school. At least, I couldn't find the one blessed as THE THEME by some English teacher.

The writer told us to look at our work—what we like to write about—because writers tend to revisit their favorite themes in their stories.

It didn't take me two seconds to realize I often write about second chances, especially in love. I did then and I still do. Sometimes my second chance involves characters who loved each other in the past (*Feather's Last Dance*) and have reconnected after a separation. Or I write about characters who have loved and lost and had no intention of loving someone again (Billie in *Stealing Destiny*). Or maybe the characters have a second chance to explore a relationship cut off by circumstances beyond their control (*Susannah's Promise*).



Ah ha! I pinpointed my favorite theme.

Best of all, I knew it was correct because I was writing the stories.

Over the years I continued to study theme and the role it plays in stories. I believe if you know the general theme of your story from the beginning, writing the story becomes easier. Not every writer feels this way. If you prefer to write your story to discover the theme, then that's how you write.

For me, having a general grasp of the theme helps.

Why?

Because it gives me direction.

I like to compare story theme with building a house. When you decide to build a house, you spend hours pouring over house plans and driving through neighborhoods, searching for the house that has the “look” you want. Once you settle on what you'd like the house to “look” like, the other choices follow in a natural order.

For example, suppose you want to build a two-story house with an English manor exterior. That choice is going to define certain aspects of whatever floor plan you choose. It's also going to define what type of architectural elements will be found through out the house. The type of windows and doors that will “go” with the house. What type of furniture you put in the house. You'll probably strive for the “look” of an English garden in the landscaping.

The house will have a theme: English manor. Once you make that decision, the English manor “theme” will influence every purchase you make.

This applies to your story, too. The theme shapes the choices you make, the characters you choose to tell the story, as well as the plot points, the dialogue, the setting...I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

Thus, I believe if you know the theme of your story at the beginning, you save a lot of time. You won't need to “discover” the theme at the end of the story and revise the story to enhance and reflect the theme.

Story Step Three

The Take Away

I kept thinking about theme and realized I should probably define theme to be sure we're on the same page.

First, let's look at what it's not. It's not the premise, it's not the plot, and it's not a situation. The theme pervades the story, it is the foundation upon which the other components of a story rest. It's what the reader takes away from the story at the end.

Thus, it is often called "the take away" or "lesson learned." It's the message you're trying to share with the reader. It's your chance to express your opinions or core ideas on the meaning of life. If you look at it that way, you can see why theme is an important tool in your writing toolbox.

Theme can often be boiled down to one word such as:

revenge
redemption
truth
honesty
courage
fear
worthiness
forgiveness
acceptance
commitment
betrayal
rebellion
transformation
quest

Transformation Theme



In my Regency novel, *Butterfly Bride*, transformation was the theme. My goal was to create a hero who would transform from a man of his time into a man of all time. Now I didn't beat the reader over the head with my theme. Rather, I created an English aristocrat raised in 19th century England. He wasn't really cruel, he just reflects the mores of his gender and the times.

As I delved deeper into the story, I realized "hope" had become a sub-theme. If he couldn't change, he would lose Hope. Quite by accident I had named his wife Hope when I created the story idea. At some point, I realized I had a sub-theme that fit well with transformation. Sub+theme equals a subordinate theme that expands or supports the theme. I felt hope in the future supported the theme of transformation.

Obviously, there is more to theme than this blog can cover. After all, people have written whole books about it. My goal is to remind you that thinking about theme early in the story writing process can help keep you on track as the story progresses.

Finding the Theme

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that if you have a theme when you start writing a story, you'll save time during the revision process. You can write scenes that enhance the theme and take advantage of opportunities to intensify the message for the reader.

If you can't pinpoint the theme before writing, be sure and look for it when you've finished your story. Once you determine your theme, re-read your story and find subtle ways to highlight it.

That said, it's still better to discover a general theme for your story as early as possible. If you're drawing a blank, try completing this simple sentence:

I want to write a story about _____?

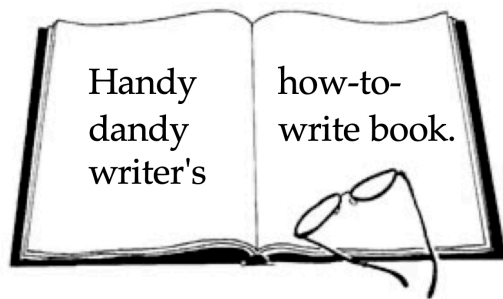
Acceptance? Betrayal? Honesty?

Fill in the blank and keep your answer in mind as you create your next story.

Story Step Four

Character Backstory

As I was winding up my undergrad degree many, many years ago, for fun I took a creative writing class. Somewhere along the way I lost the handy dandy writing how-to book we used in the class, but one recommendation stuck with me: write a detailed biography for characters prior to writing the story.



After the class, I subscribed to several writing magazines. They echoed the author's opinion that a writer had to "get to know" story characters completely before you could write about them. Over the years, I read articles and attended workshops that abounded with character lists. Hair color. Eye color. Date of birth. Educational background. Height. Weight. Favorite foods. Foods dislikes.

I could go on, but I think you get the picture.

I wasted a lot of time writing biographies full of trivial information for characters. Information I never used and soon forgot after writing it down. Gradually, my biographies changed. I started concentrating on events that shaped the characters into their current worldview. What in their past had molded them into the person they were now? I decided if I was going to spend time writing about my characters, it seemed best to create information I was actually going to use in the story.

Keep in mind when I started my writing journey, the word backstory hadn't been invented yet. According to Merriam-Webster, the word's first recorded use was in 1982, but that doesn't mean the word became well known that year. It just means someone used it for the first time in writing. When I finally came across the word "backstory"

in my perennial quest for writing advice, I just thought it was a different word for character biographies.

Therefore, I didn't pay much attention to it. I just continued to write character biographies my way without even realizing I had developed my own method for writing backstory.

As with so many words associated with writing, backstory has several meanings depending on which expert wrote the article, blog, or book. Even the dictionaries differ.

Then I lucked out. One presenter at a writing conference suggested you record at least three life events that happened in your characters' pasts that influence who they are now. This suggestion helped me focus my still sprawling backstories, but I still created characters with more dimensions than three life events.

I've always wanted more history for my characters probably because I used to be a history instructor and knew there are always many layers to historical events.

Gradually, I developed my own approach to writing backstory and it seems to have more to do with building a character's internal story rather than their physical looks. I discovered this to be true when an editor wanted to buy my short story, "Love to the Rescue."

To entice me to agree, she had a cover artist put together a cute cover. During the process, she realized I had never described the hero—his height, his eye color—that type of thing. She was amazed she hadn't realized the lack until it came time to create a hero for the cover!

Actually, I didn't notice either. I usually have some physical description of my characters, but in that particular story, I didn't. Or I did and it got cut in revisions!

Anyway, I loved the concept of the cover, but the contract had me signing away every right under the sun. I just wasn't comfortable doing that and decided to Indie publish the short story. You may have noticed I didn't put any characters on the cover.



I'm not saying the author doesn't need a basic grasp of his or her story characters. It helps to have a general idea of who they are, physically, mentally, psychologically, etc. But I no longer write detailed biographies full of minutia when I sit down to write a story. Instead I concentrate on events that made them who they are. I figure we (the characters and I) are in this for the long haul and I will get to know them better as I write about them.

Story Step Five

Building Story Characters Bit by Bit

Sierra showed up at our local small town airport, a starving, flea and tick infested Beagle. No microchip, no tags, she became an immediate addition to the family. She was an anomaly in the Beagle world because she seldom barked. From all accounts, barking is a perennial Beagle issue.

She arrived with some additional baggage, she didn't run to the door when we arrived home. This is a major dog duty and we resorted to bribing Sierra into acceptable dog-welcome-at-the-door behavior. We kept treats in the garage to reward her when we opened the door. My husband even came up with a "Sierra's happy we're home" dance.



Backstory

Naturally, I came up with a backstory to fit her behavior. If she'd been kenneled by her previous owner, she wouldn't know how to greet anyone when they arrived home. How can you greet anyone when you're locked in a kennel? Why would you bark at anything, if you're locked away from the windows and doors?

Just as I build a backstory for my rescued pets, I build a backstory for my characters. As I mentioned in the previous *Story Step*, when I first started writing, I followed the school of thought that mandated each character should have a complete biography prior to writing the story. I wrote pages and pages about each character and promptly forgot all the information while I was writing the story.

Over the years, I realized I came to know my characters best when I lived with them

and got to know them, just as I do with my pets. It's impossible to know everything about anyone all at once. What we know about our friends, our siblings, our relatives, acquaintances, or our pets, we learn gradually. Sure, we get the physical stuff the first time we see them. We know how tall they are, the color of their eyes, their weight, whether or not they have bad breath, wash their clothes, or dye their hair. We know their exterior, but we don't know their interior.

Based on their exterior, we draw instant judgments because first impressions weigh heavily in our biological background. It's what warns us whether we should run or stay. We all have stories about a poor first impression we've made on someone else. And stories of people mistaking something about us based on a first impression we created.

Writing Characters

I'm not dismissing the importance of a character's backstory, but I found I learn more about a character while I'm writing the story, just as I learn about other people and pets by spending time with them. I'm more interested in the characters' hearts and souls, than in what school they attended. And to learn about their hearts and souls, I have to write their story.

That's not to say what school the character attended isn't important, but maybe it isn't germane to the particular story I'm writing. And if it is important, the character will let me know as I get to know him or her. Just if they will let me know that they are shy, or talkative, or scared of the dark.

Story Step Six

What to Call Your Characters

Choosing names for your characters is an important early step when writing a story. Assigning names helps you bond with your characters more than calling them Male #1 or Female #2.

Names carry a lot of weight. This is as true in real life as it is in a story. Choosing the right name for your characters is important.

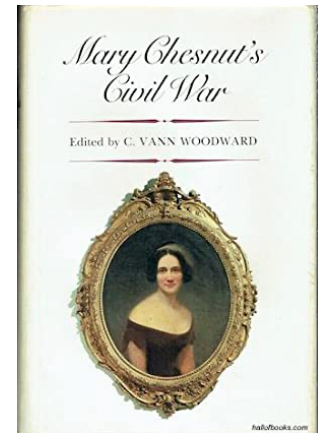
	A	B	C	D
	First Names			
1	First Name	Gender	Date / Age	Comments
2	"Speed"			
3	Ada	F	b. early 1900s	
4	Adalynne	F	b. 1998 ish	from h.s. article
5	Adera	F		
6	Aeriell	F	b. 1998 ish	
7	Aima	F	b. 1905	
8	Alannah	F	b. 1997	
9	Alixé	F		
10	Alline	F	b. 1905	
11	Allysse	F	b.1997	
12	Alton	M		
13	Annell	F		
14	Annie Bell	F		
15	Artis	M		
16	Asalee	F		
17	Atless	F	1907	
18	Augera	F		
19	Augusta Lafayette	M		

I love names and have a spreadsheet of several hundred male and female names I've collected over the years. I've visited cemeteries to record names and life span dates from gravestones. I've found unusual names in obituary columns and news articles, and I've plucked names off the identity badges of sales clerks.

I'm not shy about name gathering or asking the story behind an unusual name. After complimenting a person's name, I often ask him or her about its origin. The stories vary, but often their parent is paying homage to a relative or friend, or they've taken the name from a story by a favorite author.

I also regularly access the U.S. Social Security Administration's baby names web pages. This site comes in handy for researching the popularity of names by the decade. Did you know the girl's name "Emma" was not only the most popular name for 2018, it was also the top contender in 1880?

I write historical romances and one way to keep characters' names true to a certain time period is to check the bibliography of nonfiction books. *Mary Chestnut's Civil War*, a memoir edited by C. Van Woodward, offers a treasure trove of mid-nineteenth century American names. Historical biographies or memoirs from any time period provide the writer with many choices for character names.



When selecting the names of your characters, be sure you have a variety of names that begin with different sounds. If you pepper your story with too many alliterative names, it can be confusing to the reader. Your goal is to keep your reader reading, not confuse him or her. If you've ended up with a Polly, a Paula, a Patsy, and a Petunia, you need to rethink your characters' names.

Now, I realize parents sometimes get a little carried away when naming children and some love the idea of all the names beginning with the same letter. But think about the classic *Little Women* for a moment. By giving the four sisters completely different names (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy), Louisa May Alcott ensured we'd be able to tell them apart as we read their story.

Another pitfall for writers when naming a character is to pick hard to pronounce names. To be honest, if I can't figure out how to pronounce a name, I just come up with a nickname to use. I know I'm not the only one who substitutes an easier version when faced with an unpronounceable name.

My suggestion, think twice about wasting a lot of time coming up with a name your readers can't pronounce. If you just can't let go of an odd name, you have two choices: use it on a supporting character or supply its correct pronunciation as soon as possible. If you chose option two, weave it into the story. Perhaps another character stumbles over the pronunciation and the main character corrects him or her. Using an easy to pronounce or well known word as a synonym will probably help readers the most.

For example, this character's name is Terry Lough. The nurse pronounces it incorrectly.

“Ms. Luge?” The nurse looked up from the file she was reading to scan the waiting room.

The mispronunciation of her name grated across Terry's nerves. She stood and beaded for the nurse. As she drew closer, she said, “Not the toboggan race. Lough, as in a tree log.”

Always remember, your goal as a writer is to write a story that captivates readers. When the reader gets hung up on the pronunciation of a character's name, unwillingness to continue reading is a possible response.

Story Step Seven

What To Call Your Story

As some point in this writing process, you're going to want to hang a title on your story. Don't worry over what to call it this early. The purpose of giving a work in progress (WIP) a title is to differentiate it from any other story you're writing. Finding the perfect title isn't as important as writing the story.

The role of a working title is to give substance to your project. Ideas for possible titles will hit you as you wrestle the story into submission. Rather than change the working title every other day, just keep a list of possible titles.

Titles are not my strong point and I set myself up for headaches with my Tassanoxie series (all the stories are set in one town, but can be read in any order). It all started with the first book, *Feather's Last Dance*. I was rather proud of this title. Then, the second book ended up being titled *Ellie's Song*. Hmmmm, by happy accident both books contained the heroine's name.

Two published titles containing the heroine's name gave me the (crazy?) idea to include the heroine's name in all my Tassanoxie titles. For someone who lacks the coming-up-with-a-great-title gene, this probably wasn't a good idea.



A holiday short story was the next entry into the Tassanoxie family. I set about choosing a heroine's name that would reflect the season. Then I wrote a story the editors retitled because they already had a Christmas short story with a similar title. It seems we writers share some of the same ideas for titles, especially when coming up with the title of Christmas stories. But I used my title idea, "Merry Anne's Christmas Wish," when I indie published my story.

Susannah's Promise, a novella, followed Merry. It took several tries to arrive at a title my unofficial committee of title approvers liked. My next short story, was “The Courtship of Selena Smith.” I think it took longer to choose a title than it took to write the short story.



My first novel *Stealing Destiny* went through several title names. The working title was *D'Angelo's Revenge*. When it won Best in Show as well as Best in Category in a writing contest, I had changed the title to *D'Angelo's Destiny*. After failing to interest an editor with that title, I changed it to *D'Angelo's Angel*. Of course, when Kensington published it, someone stuck the title *Tennessee Waltz* on it.

Not only did Kensington already have a published historical romance by that name, (which they pulled when I advised them of this issue), but the heroine in my novel couldn't really waltz—she'd fallen off a horse and broke her ankle which hadn't healed correctly.

Needless to say, when I indie published my novel, I finally settled on *Stealing Destiny*.



While it can seem a little daunting to come up with story titles, my advice is to write your story, get to know your characters, and your world. Stick with your working title, but keep your mind open to other possibilities. As I said earlier, jot them down. Let them age like a fine wine. What you thought would work well when you started your story may not feel right by the time you reach the end.

Just keep in mind, if you're traditionally published, none of your title suggestions might make it onto the final product!

Story Step Eight

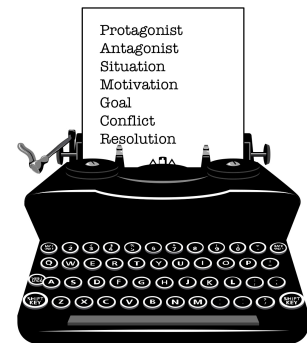
Essential Story Ingredients

You've got an idea for a story, a general idea of your theme, characters with interesting backstories, character names, and a working title. Now what?

You need to include what I like to call “essential story ingredients.”

What could those be?

Well, a story needs at least one **protagonist**. The word protagonist originated in Greek drama and means the main character. This is the story character you want the reader to like, to cheer on, and become the most emotionally invested in whether or not he or she succeeds.



I write romance and consider both the heroine and the hero to be a protagonist because I write scenes in both points-of-view. I want the readers to become emotionally involved with my two main characters and of course, I also want my readers to like them.

You'll need an **antagonist**. This is just a “writerly” word for adversary or opponent. Someone who doesn't want the hero and/or heroine to achieve their goals. While the antagonist is usually another character, it could be a natural event such as a flood in the man against nature stories. Or the whale in *Moby Dick*.

Then a good story needs a **situation** that bumps the main character(s) out of their current rut. The situation needs to be something that forces the main character(s) to act. In my current release, *Butterfly Bride*, the hero returns to England and discovers his wife has initiated divorce proceedings. This situation forces him to act.

Another important ingredient is **motivation**. In *Butterfly Bride*, the hero is motivated by the need to avoid scandal. Plus, he's motivated by the potential loss of his wife's dowry. A divorce would mean repaying monies he doesn't have which will ruin him financially.

The heroine is motivated by the belief her husband loves another woman.



The situation and motivation provide a **goal** for characters, another important component of a story. My hero needs to figure out how to stop his wife from divorcing him. The heroine needs to protect her heart.

Every well written story has **conflict**. In *Butterfly Bride*, the hero's cousin is the antagonist who creates conflict. This cousin wants the hero and heroine to divorce because he's in love with the heroine and wants to marry her. There are, of course, many other obstacles for the hero and heroine to overcome. A writer cannot make things easy for the main characters or the reader

will become bored with the story.

Last, but not least, the story has to have a satisfying **resolution**. In other words, the story needs to resolve the issues in such a way that satisfies the reader.

Essential Ingredients of a Story

Every story needs:

- A protagonist
- An antagonist
- A situation
- Motivation
- Goal
- Conflict
- Resolution

Ensuring I have all the essential ingredients helps me figure out any holes that might exist. A writer needs to keep in mind that people have been telling and listening to stories for time immemorial. Good storytellers accept that readers bring certain expectations to the reading experience. Expectations you must meet to keep your readers reading.

Story Step Nine

Storyboarding: A Useful Writing Management Tool

Storyboarding can be useful during any of the phases of creating your story. It not only helps with the actual writing, you don't have to be an artist to use this idea.

For starters, let's look at the definition:

Storyboarding is a sequence of pictures created to communicate a desired general visual appearance. Although storyboarding has been traditionally associated with cinema, its beginnings can be traced back to Leonardo da Vinci, who put his ideas on a wall and examined the layout prior to producing the final painting.

Popularity of Storyboarding

Storyboarding has become popular in many professions. If you've seen any documentaries on making a film, such as *The Mandalorian* docuseries, you've seen examples of story boards. I discovered storyboarding when I took a web design course. Blocks, lines, and text were used to sketch out web pages and how to link them. No drawing skill involved.

Writing Management Tool

I originally used 3" x 5" (or 4 x 6) index cards for scenes as I planned a book. The size of the cards makes it easy to shift them around as you're trying to decide the best way to tell your story.

At first, I wrote story information on the cards by hand. I would cut out character photos from magazines or newspapers and copy photos of period clothing from library books, journals, or my own library. All this pictorial information was kept in file folders because the index cards were too small for them.

Then, I learned how to set the page size and run off computer generated 3x5 or 4x6 cards. At first, I continued as before and the cards were text only. But as I became comfortable using computer graphics, I started adding small pictures pertinent to the scene: a carriage, a pretty hat for my heroine to wear, or a piece of antique furniture. Items that helped set the scene for me.

Here's two sample index cards. The first one I used when writing *Feather's Last Dance*. As you can see from the second sample, I had progressed into adding images in Scene Two of *Butterfly Bride*.

ACT ONE

Scene 2: POV Faith

Starla had to bring Matthew to club because couldn't find a babysitter.

Chapter One
Scene 2: Hope's bedroom

Hope's father wakes her up with the news she is to marry a stranger within an hour.



POV: Hope

Goal: To obey father

Motivation: She loves and trusts father.

Conflict: Scared b/c she doesn't know groom & worried about father's mental state

As you can see, the lack of artistic talent doesn't prevent a writer from using this technique. Storyboarding is a fun way to better visualize your story and it's easy to tailor storyboarding to your needs. However you chose to use it, storyboarding is an excellent writing management tool.

Story Step Ten

The Dreaded Synopsis

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines synopsis as a brief summary or general survey of something. In the writer's case, this something is usually a book, a short story, or an article

I think there are two types of synopsis. The first is what I call the generic synopsis and is the most familiar one. Somewhere along my writing journey, I also ran into the narrative synopsis.

The difference between a generic synopsis and a narrative synopsis lies in its purpose. The generic synopsis is written to entice an agent to represent the writer or an editor to offer the writer a contract.

A narrative synopsis is NOT the type of synopsis sent to an agent or editor. The narrative synopsis is a stream of consciousness account of all the connected events that will take place in the story.

Generic Synopsis

Let's first look at the generic synopsis. This type of synopsis comes in a variety of lengths, depending on the audience. If you are writing the synopsis for publishing professionals, it's up to you to discover the ideal length preference for submission to that editor or agent and then to stick to the guidelines. If an editor requests a three page synopsis, do not send a ten page synopsis. On the other hand, if an agent wants a ten page synopsis, don't attach the three page synopsis to the submission.



Some contest entries require a synopsis. If a synopsis is requested as part of the submission, the length parameters will be listed in the contest rules. Again, stick to the guidelines. While a contest synopsis is often used to give the judges context and isn't part of the judging, it is a good idea to polish it as well as you do your story entry.

Many writers dislike writing any type of synopsis and don't write one until they have finished a rough draft. I followed that school of thought in the beginning of my writing career. I didn't write the synopsis until I finished the manuscript. Before I was published, it wasn't unusual for me to write 5 or 6 synopses for a novel. They ranged in length from 1 to 15 pages.

Writing a Generic Synopsis

The seven essential ingredients I mentioned in Story Steps Eight (protagonist, antagonist, situation, motive, goal, conflict, and resolution) offer a good starting point for writing a synopsis. It's also helpful to have major turning points or plot points in mind. These are the obstacles or events that are going to cause your characters to "turn away" from the path they were following. It always helps to have some idea of why your main character(s) can't reach their goals easily.

Since the generic synopsis is part of your sales pitch, it needs to "hook" the reader, be that an editor or agent, and pull them into your story. The generic synopsis can also be a treasure trove of material for the pitch for that all important editor or agent meeting. Or to write the 100 word ad. Or hook visitors into reading an excerpt at your website. Or write press releases and advertisements.

Plus, if you're unsure of the theme, the synopsis is an excellent place to find it.

How can a synopsis help you figure out the theme? Think about it. You're writing a five page synopsis of a 100,000 word novel. Basically, you're condensing a 400 page novel into a five page novel. You have to strip the story down to its essence. This exercise can help you find the theme, because to find the core of the story, you must think in terms of one overriding idea which, of course, is the theme.

Remember this is a short story of your novel. It should also contain the prerequisite beginning, middle, and end.

Narrative Synopsis

Once I had mastered my fear of writing a synopsis, I discovered that writing one

during the early stages of shaping my story helped me stay on track. Gradually, I transitioned into also writing what is called the narrative synopsis.

This type of synopsis is a written account of connected events. It's not designed to entice an agent or editor to want to read all of your story. It is a rambling account of what's happening. Some events may get a sentence while other events will have paragraphs devoted to them. I use the narrative synopsis as an opportunity to sketch out the major events of the story. It's not written in stone, but it gives me an idea of where I'm going, a roadmap of unfolding events.

What I love most about the narrative synopsis is that it eradicates the problem of blank pages. Each sentence in the synopsis offers me the possibility of a scene. I now have the bare bones of a story just waiting to be fleshed out.

The narrative synopsis is not a rough draft because the narrative synopsis is a "this happens and then this happens" type of account. It won't be edited and revised and rewritten, its job is to help you get an overview of the story you plan to write. It's more of a chronological roadmap. It starts with the earliest events of the story and connected events in the order in which they occur.

5 Reasons to Love the Narrative Synopsis:

- It makes you think about the story from beginning to end which helps you organize the story line.
- It forces you to create interesting characters with viable needs, goals, and flaws.
- It makes you think about the middle of the book.
- It gives you vital turning points so you have specific places to go with the story.
- It gives you an ending to write toward.

How Do the Generic and Narrative Synopses Differ?

What I call the generic synopsis is written for an agent, editor, or contest judge. It is a high concept summary of the story written in a compelling format to catch attention. Events are not necessarily in order because this synopsis is written to showcase the story, grab attention, and entice the audience to read the sample chapters.

The narrative synopsis is written solely for your edification. The goal of this synopsis is to get the story down. With a narrative synopsis in hand, writing the rough draft becomes easier. This synopsis provides an account of connected events that become scenes. It ensures you rarely face a blank page.

- Generic synopsis ensures all the story ingredients are there and working together.
- Narrative synopsis makes you think about the connected story events.

Both synopses help hone a writer's skill in storytelling.

In Conclusion

I hope you enjoyed reading about my process in writing a story. Here's brief recap of the steps I discussed:

- The idea for a story
- Theme
- Reader take away
- Backstory
- How to build character backstory
- Choosing character names
- A working title
- Seven essential story ingredients of a story
- Storyboarding
- The dreaded synopsis