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“So, what are you writing?”

Tools to help you answer this question when you announce you are a writer.

Penny Thomas, M.F.A. Writing

Much of this presentation is taken from lectures given by the talented faculty at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania for the Masters of Fine Arts in Writing Popular Fiction I took a few years ago.

One of the things we students had to do was answer the question, “So, what are you writing?” Or, “What’s your book about?”

We were told that our answers determine whether the question poser was going to listen and hopefully buy our book, or walk away with glazed eyes, bored at our long-winded attempts to condense our master pieces into a few riveting sentences.

The purpose of this presentation is to give you some tools to get readers interested in your book, whether they bump into you in the street, at a party, in an elevator, or a book fair. You’ll need to craft a piece to give the Daily Sun’s Ethan Palmer for his Sunday piece on Villages Authors. And for Amazon and your web site. Where ever it is, your answer should be short and grab people’s attention.

There are three types of narratives that will give your readers a taste of what your book contains without boring them to death or giving away the ending.

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- Tag line – a one-liner hook – 10 words
- Log line (Elevator pitch) (2 or 3 sentences) 25 – 30 words
- Back cover blurb – 200 words

I’m also going to talk about genre and why it is important to know yours and, if you don’t know, how you can find it.

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Know your genre:

- Fiction
- Non-Fiction

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These then lead you into two things you need if you're entering competitions, querying editors and publishers.

- Short synopsis
- Long synopsis

First I'm going to talk about Genre as it sets the tone for the rest of the presentation.

Genre

Why do you need to know your genre? Because the reader wants to know if your book fits into their preferred reading choice. And, Amazon sorts books by Genre.

What is Genre? It is a group of texts that share certain similarities. Specific genres have certain in-built codes, values, and expectations. Some genres have very specific rules. Readers don't know these rules, but they know or sense if the writer breaks them and get very upset. Breaking the rules of genre is worse for readers than poor grammar and punctuation.

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Some of the main Fiction Genres

- Romance
- Action Adventure
- Science Fiction
- Fantasy
- Speculative Fiction
- Suspense/Thriller
- Horror/Paranormal/Ghost
- Mystery/Crime
- Historical
- Family Saga
- Western
- Women's Fiction
- Magic Realism
- Literary Fiction
- New Adult (18 – 30 yrs old)
- Young Adult (12 – 18 yrs old)
- Children

The best-selling book genres in Self-publishing are: Romance, Fantasy. Science Fiction.

Mystery, Thriller, Crime come in second.

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Some Non-Fiction Genres (there are too many to list)

- Biography/Autobiography
- History
- How To
- Cooking
- Arts and Crafts
- Sports
- Business
- Religion
- Spirituality

Quite a few of my fellow MFA students weren't sure of the genre they were writing in. I admit I first thought I was writing a Romance with thriller elements. But after the first term, my mentor told me I couldn't write a romantic scene to save my life. She was right. So I tweaked my story to a Thriller with Romantic Elements. Then I was told my 'thrilling' scenes weren't thrilling enough, and my writing read more like a mystery. So I had to go back and insert a lot of clues and red herrings. Believe me, it is easier if you know what genre you're writing in before you start writing.

Genre determines the key words you use when writing your three narratives. Key words are the genre specific, informational words that are used in search engines (like Google) that determine the content of a your book.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to know your genre.

It's how readers will know if they want to read your book. You'll write it on your marketing material. You'll enter that category in competitions. You'll put a big sign up at your table at the book fair telling everyone what you write.

There is nothing so intimidating to a prospective buyer to have to ask the hopeful looking author, 'What kind of book is this?' The reader wants to know up front so they can either walk on, or stop and browse and chat to the author.

So...How to you figure out what genre your story fits into?

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- Check the book cover of your favorite author. Ask yourself if your manuscript has similar elements. In truth, you should be writing the kind of book you like to read.

- When you've identified the author you think write like you want to, then log onto Amazon and pull up a book by that author and see how that book is categorized and what are the key words. There's a lot of information on Amazon that'll show you what genre that author is classified as writing in.
- You can also go to a book store and see what category this author is shelved under. Ask yourself, where would my book go.

Now that we've established Genre let's move on to"

Narratives you need for your book.

Book descriptions are more likely to sell than book covers. When thriller writer Mark Dawson polled his 10,000 plus readers, he found that four times as people found him through his descriptions compared to his covers.

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- Tag line – a one-liner hook 10 words
- Log line (two or three sentences) – 25 – 30 words a.k.a. Elevator Pitch.
- Back cover blurb – 200 words

A Tag line tends to be short (10 words) and is in some way linked to the story's central problem or major conflict. It gives a sense of the story. It can appear as a question. It's a compelling phrase or sentence that aims to intrigue and hook the reader and stay with them. Also known as Shout lines or Strap lines in the United Kingdom. The movie industry uses it a lot, and savvy authors are now creating tag lines because it can be used in your printed promotional material (business cards, book marks, web site) and it can start off your back-copy blurb.

Examples from movies (I'll give you some book examples later as they are attached to blurbs)

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Tag line that stay with you

- In space, no one can hear you scream. (Alien)
- An epic of miniature proportions (A Bug's Life)
- Don't go in the water (Jaws)
- The Toys are Back in Town (Toy Story 2)
- EARTH—take a good look. Today could be your last (Independence Day)

Logline (also can be used as the Elevator Pitch)

Don't confuse this with the tag line. A log line is a basic description of your plot in about twenty-five to thirty words. It should contain all the necessary elements for telling a good story, such as:

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Log line (also can be used as the Elevator Pitch) 25-30 words

- Who is your main character?
- What does she want? What is her goal?
- Why does she want this (motivation)?
- What are the obstacles in her way?
- What makes the story unique?

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Rules of Thumb for Log Lines

- Be succinct without being sparse. The trick is to create a logline that is pithy but has substance. It must be clear that the antagonistic force is an obstacle to the major goal. It must imply that something is at stake; it must suggest that something can be lost.
- Don't use the main character's name, it's a waste of words. The exception to this rule is if the book is a series and the protagonist is a well-known like Jack Reacher or James Bond.
- Use a descriptive adjective to give the main character depth in a word or two. Instead of describing the main character as "*a detective*" use "*a cynical fifty-year-old detective*" or "*a young, enthusiastic detective.*" Using "*an ex-superhero*" tells a lot more than "*a superhero.*" "*An alcoholic ex-superhero*" conveys even more to the reader.
- Make the genre clear in the text. Try to do it without stating the genre. If your novel is a romance, you need a hero and heroine in the logline, mention love. Science fiction, mention aliens. Mystery, mention the crime. The logline should tell the reader what the genre is.
- Present a succinct description of the protagonist's main goal and place it as close to the beginning as possible.

- Make your protagonist pro-active. Show the action of the story.
- Include the stakes or a ticking time-bomb
- Do NOT reveal the twist or surprise at the end. The logline (and the book) should work by itself without the “bonus” surprise at the end. Do NOT reveal the ending.
- Make every word count.
- Sell it, don’t tell it.

One suggestion from many authors: Write your Log Line before you write your novel, or at least near the beginning of your typing. It’ll save you some trouble later on because if you can’t make the logline work, it’s probably because the story doesn’t work.

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Here are some examples of Tag lines and log lines working together:

How about this one for the movie *Jaws*?

•Tag line

Don’t go in the water.

•Log line

A sheriff struggles to protect his beach community after a grisly shark attack, but greed rules the Chamber of Commerce. (21 words)

Another good example is the movie *Alien*. This comes up often as an example.

•Tag line

In space, no one can hear you scream.

•Log line

After responding to a distress signal, a space crew is forced to confront a deadly alien who stows aboard their ship, leaving one member to fend for herself. (28 words)

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Here are some structures to help with your log line: The **Reds** are the elements of your plot. I have some copies here.

- The subject of the sentence will describe an imperfect but passionate and active **PROTAGONIST**. The verb will depict the **BATTLE**. And the direct object will

describe an insurmountable **ANTAGONIST** who tries to stop the protagonist from reaching a physical **GOAL** on account of the **STAKES**, if the goal is not reached.

- To stop **A**, character **B** must do **C**, but **D** happens.
- When **A** happens, character **B** must take some action(**C**) but **D** happens.
- Character **B** does something, then when **A** happens they must do **C**, but **D** happens.
- **TITLE** is a **GENRE** about **ADJECTIVE/DESCRIPTION OF MAIN CHARACTER**, who wants to **DEFAULT ACTION**. But when **CALL TO ACTION**, he must **STORY GOAL**, which seems impossible because **CENTRAL CONFLICT**.

The Back Cover Blurb

The Back-cover blurb gives the reader a taste of what lies between the covers of the book. It is not a synopsis, a blurb endorsement from celebrities or other authors, or a review. You, the author, writes the back-cover blurb (though there is an industry of professional back-cover blurb writers...but who wants to pay someone to create something that you, the author knows intimately?)

It's about 200 words that will hook someone into buying and reading your book. It is a sales pitch. It appears on the back of paperbacks. On the inside of the jacket of a hardback book. Amazon uses it just below the title of your book. And you use it on your author web site. It is used in fiction and non-fiction books.

Often the Tagline headlines the back cover blurb.

Some Do's and Don'ts

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Do

- Reference the genre and central theme
- Create intrigue around the main conflict
- Introduce the protagonist (you can name him/her)
- Keep it short (200 words)
- Use key words
- Reference your credentials, if it relates to your book

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Don't

- Give away any spoilers
- Give a summary of the first chapter
- Say how amazing your book is
- Compare yourself or your book to other books or writers.

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A formula for writing a Fiction Back Cover Blurb (thank you Beth Bacon)

1. **Situation.** Briefly, describe the circumstances of the story.
2. **Problem.** Next write about the situation or hitch that makes change inevitable.
3. **Hopeful Possibility.** Here you provide the hope of overcoming the crisis. This is the cool character or long shot possibility that gives hope that the difficult problem can be overcome.
4. **Mood.** This part describes the emotional state that readers will have from reading your story. Example phrases include: “dark, dystopian tragedy”, “humorous chick lit cotton candy”, or “suspenseful, romantic and awash in...magic”.

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Here's a back book blurb example for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, by J.K. Rowling

“Till now there's been no magic for Harry Potter. He lives with the miserable Dursleys and their abominable son, Dudley. Harry's room is a tiny closet beneath the stairs, and he hasn't had a birthday party in eleven years.

But then a mysterious letter arrives by owl messenger: a letter with an invitation to an incredible place called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And there he finds not only friends, flying sports on broomsticks, and magic in everything from classes to meals, but a great destiny that's been waiting for him ... if Harry can survive the encounter.”

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A Template For Writing A Non-Fiction Book Blurb

Courtesy of Kelly Exeter

- Introduce the problem
- Outline how you propose to solve it (bullet points are good)
- Tell the reader how their lives will be better after reading your book

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Here's a back book cover example of Jen Sincero's *You Are a Badass* follows this formula:

"*You Are a Badass* is the self-help book for people who desperately want to improve their lives but don't want to get busted doing it.

In a refreshingly entertaining how-to guide ... Jen Sincero serves up 27 bite-sized chapters ... helping you to:

- Identify and change the self-sabotaging beliefs and behaviors that stop you from getting what you want.
- Create a life you totally love. And create it NOW.
- Make some damn money already. The kind you've never made before.

By the end of *You Are a Badass*, you'll understand why you are how you are, how to love what you can't change, how to change what you don't love, and how to use The Force to kick some serious ass."

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Examples of fiction tag lines with Blurbs

The Deepest Grave (Fiona Griffiths Crime Thriller Series)

By Harry Bingham

An ancient battle. A dead researcher. And a very modern crime.
(Tag line)

It's been more than a year since Detective Sergeant Fiona Griffiths had any sort of murder case . . . when all of a sudden, she gets the call. A local archaeologist has been found bloodily murdered. Her head severed from her body. Her eyes apparently fixed on a fragment of Latin text. The crime seems to summon the ghosts of Dark Age Britain - and the shade of King Arthur. But why are those ancient enmities alive once again? Why are armed burglars raiding remote country churches? And how many more people

will die before these clues are unraveled? Fiona thinks she knows the answers to these questions . . . but the crime that underlies them all is so utterly unexpected, so breathtakingly audacious in its execution, that it hasn't yet been committed. (Back copy blurb)

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How To Win Friends and Influence People

by Dale Carnegie

You can go after the job you want—and get it!)
 You can take the job you have—and improve it!) Tag line or log line
 You can take any situation—and make it work for you!)

Dale Carnegie's rock-solid, time-tested advice has carried countless people up the ladder of success in their business and personal lives. One of the most groundbreaking and timeless bestsellers of all time, *How to Win Friends & Influence People* will teach you:

- Six ways to make people like you
- Twelve ways to win people to your way of thinking
- Nine ways to change people without arousing resentment

And much more! Achieve your maximum potential—a must-read for the twenty-first century with more than 15 million copies sold! (Back copy blurb)

Synopsis

Now we come to the dreaded synopsis. If you are going down the traditional route of publishing, it is essential. You use it to sell your book to the publisher.

If you're self-publishing you might need a synopsis to enter writing competitions. However, a synopsis is a great way to keep you on track with the progress of your book and to give you the big picture of the plot.

A synopsis is a complete narrative of your story told in present tense. It should include essential plot points plus your character's emotional reactions. It reveals the twists and the ending.

The synopsis can act as a writing guideline while not being so rigid that your story can't change. When you finish the actual writing portion, you can return to the original synopsis and revise it to suit the finished storyline.

- A good place to start is with the tag line you created
- Use present tense
- Open with a hook.
- Use action verbs. Your story should be engaging as you convey it to the reader.
- Make sure the story flows in a logical manner from scene to scene

- Avoid backstory. Stick to present tense and keep moving the story forward.
- Leave out minor characters, physical descriptions unless applicable to the storyline, and subplots unless critical to the resolution of the main plot.
- Avoid snippets of conversation, point-to-point description of your character's every move, jumping from one place to another without any explanation, gratuitous sex, or threats on a character's life unless they evolve from the story.
- Include your character's emotional reactions.
- Stay in the protagonist's viewpoint as you would in the story.
- Show your character's internal struggle as well as her external conflict. What's inhibiting her from making a commitment to the hero? What is causing her to doubt her abilities?
- Tell us what's at stake for the heroine. What will happen if she fails?
- If it's the first book in a series, you might begin with a short profile of your sleuth.
- Explain the ending. This means you should tell whodunit and why.
- What life lesson will your protagonist learn in this story?
- Reveal the ending.

A synopsis can be one page or ten pages (short or long synopsis). Publishers and competition organizers often stipulate what length they want.

Non-Fiction writers do not use a synopsis. They use an outline, just like you learned in school.

Again, you don't need a synopsis to self-publish, but it is a useful tool to keep your story line on track.

In Conclusion

You need to know your genre so you can pigeonhole your book for:

- Prospective readers
- Amazon
- Competitions

You need the following narratives to sell your book.

- Tag line – a one-liner hook – 10 words
- Log line (two or three sentences) – 25 – 30 words a.k.a. Elevator Pitch
- Back cover blurb – 200 – 250 words

And you need these if you're entering competitions, querying editors and/or publishers.

- Short synopsis
- Long synopsis