

Synopsis

Learning Standard: Write a summary of a movie or other literary form that includes the main ideas and most significant details and uses the student's own words

Procedure: Before beginning, explain to the students that screenwriting is the art and craft of writing scripts for film, television, video games, and other visual media. A script is the written document on which a film or other visual form is based. It will describe the plot, characters, setting, and other elements needed to create the film. Most of the script will be the lines that the characters speak in the film.

The screenwriting course begins with synopsis for two principal reasons. It allows the movie on which the course is based to be introduced, and writing a synopsis or summary is a task that students understand. In addition, writing a synopsis sometimes precedes the development of a script, and engaging in this task will help students think about a more complete script. One of the activities in this module is for students to write a synopsis for their own movie. This synopsis will serve as the basis for future modules.

Display the pages of the guided learning unit one at a time. The components include an explanation of a synopsis, an example synopsis of *Bandslam*, and some keys to writing a good synopsis.

Allow the students a few minutes to skim each component and then read the text out loud. Reading the text out loud increases the likelihood that all students will be able to understand and participate. Pause appropriately to explain concepts contained in the instructional text, especially concepts that might not be familiar to all the students. Solicit comments from the students and ask questions to promote their thinking or evaluate their understanding. Elaborate on the instructional text as is needed for your students.

Practice: Arrange the students in small groups of 3 or 4. As an alternative, the entire class may work together. Have each group choose a familiar movie and compose a synopsis of the movie. If necessary, have the students group themselves according to movies the members of a group have seen. The synopsis of *Bandslam* and the keys to writing a synopsis should be available to the students.

Encourage the groups to use a modification of the writing process to compose the synopsis. They can take notes, compile the notes into a draft, and then revise the draft. One person in the group should be responsible for writing the draft and revision. Have the members of the group polish the revision by checking for style. The process may take more than one session, so allow the groups the time they need to complete the synopsis.

Display the completed synopses or print them out and distribute them to the groups. Allow the groups to read all the synopses and comment on them.

Extending the Activity: As individuals, small groups, or an intact class, have the students develop a synopsis of one page or less for their own movie script. When you explain the assignment, remind the students that they are not developing the entire screenplay. They are simply to think of a story, choose a title, and write a synopsis. If possible, allow the students to review other synopses available on the Internet or make these synopses available to them. Give the students the option of writing the synopsis in the format of *Bandslam* or in another format, but remind them that the synopsis must be one page or less.

Note: Have the students retain the synopses because they will be useful in other modules.

Internet Search Suggestion: Have the students search for a synopsis for a favorite movie.

Synopsis

The *synopsis* is a summary of the plot of a movie, book, television show, or play. A synopsis is usually written after the original work. This kind of synopsis is used to review or promote the work. If you read a movie review in a newspaper or on the Internet, it will usually begin with a synopsis.

Sometimes a synopsis is written before the movie or other work is even started. A synopsis written before the movie helps the writer sell the idea to the person or group who might produce the movie. Creating a synopsis may also help the writer develop the idea for the movie.

A synopsis does not try to tell the whole story. It focuses on a few characters and the most important parts of the story. A good synopsis makes the person who reads it want to see the movie.

Here is an example of a synopsis. It is from the movie *Bandslam*, which went into production in the fall of 2008. This synopsis is based on the screenplay and was written before the movie was released.

Bandslam: A Synopsis

Bandslam is an interesting twist on a familiar story. Will Burton finds himself in a new high school in New Jersey with no friends and a hopeless attitude. Fortunately, music, a droll sense of humor, a marginal obsession with David Bowie, and a remarkable mother make his life bearable.

A series of unlikely circumstances bring Will together with some of the other outsiders in the school, including SA5M (the 5 is silent) and another student, Charlotte, who is a recovering “it” girl. Along with several other talented but somewhat quirky musicians, the group forms a band that competes in a battle of the bands, billed as “Texas high school football BIG.”

As the group’s sound finally comes together, a tragic event in Charlotte’s life jeopardizes everything, including the relationships that Will has established. The band manages to pull itself together for the slam, but a completely unexpected event dashes their hopes even further. Rather than admit defeat, I Can’t Go On, I’ll Go On—the band’s over the top name—totally rocks the house. They accomplish the unexpected in a way that is as improbable as it is fulfilling.

Keys to Writing a Good Synopsis

- Limit the synopsis to one page or less.
- Include the most important conflict or events in the story
- Use the present tense except for events that come before the story.
- Link the paragraphs to one another in a logical way.
- Write in a way that almost anyone can understand the story.
- Describe where the story happens and at least the major character.
Other characters may be introduced, but don't make the synopsis too detailed.
- Try to convince the reader that the story is interesting and would be a good movie.
- Include a sentence or two about the beginning and ending scenes of the movie.
- Let your voice or style come through in the synopsis.
- Proofread the synopsis for correct style, grammar, and usage.