Since the advent of social media, most people have begun to appreciate how much - or how little - it is possible to say when writing with a very limited number of characters.

If you work writing synopses for Media and Entertainment metadata - the likelihood is you knew that already. The movie synopsis turns short-form writing into a fine art.

The standard length for a linear EPG (Electronic Program Guide) is 180 characters - not much longer than a single Tweet. Streaming platforms might give you 250 characters to work with. This is all the real estate that you have to sell this media to your audience and convince them to watch - a single sentence, two at most - and perhaps a couple of seconds before they make their decision or flip the channel. This is why you really need to make your synopses count!

What to Consider

Here are a few rules and tips to help you master the complex and subtle art of synopsis-writing.

Source Data

You simply cannot write about a movie or a TV series without accurate information to work with. It's highly likely you will be writing to improve or expand an existing synopsis - but make sure the information you have is accurate. Who is the director? Are there big names in the cast? Has it won any major awards? Does this have a 'cult' position in pop culture? A good synopsis will do more than tell you what happens - it will tell you why you want to watch this media.

Know Your Audience

Synopses written for broadcast on general entertainment channels will be very different to those written for a niche VoD service for movie-buffs. Even when writing about the same movie, different synopses could be required for different platforms. For instance, for a linear channel competing for a broad audience you might want to focus on the bankable big-name stars in the cast, while for an Art-House subscription service, the synopsis may want to reference high-brow cultural influences such as the

'French New Wave', or the 'experimental cinematography'. It's a question of tailoring the language and tone to the particular audience, and the individual brand. Any brand you work for will have it's own 'tone', that you should always seek to fully understand.

Understand the Platform

Some platforms display a large amount of contextual metadata - others very little. Make sure you are aware of what is on display. For instance, if the Cast & Crew is already clearly listed on screen next to the synopsis - you may want to focus more on the plot, or other aspects - but if there is only a title on display, you may want to mention Brad Pitt or Quentin Tarantino if they are involved.

Ruthlessly Prioritise

You have limited real estate to get your message across, so don't waste it. Prioritise ruthlessly. What is the most important factor about the media you are writing about? This will be different for movies and dramas. For movies, genre, director, franchise and actors can all easily be the most important factor. For TV drama, plot is far more important. In some cases you will simply have too much information to fit in.

For instance, here is the huge wealth of relevant information for the film, 'Saving Private Ryan'.

- Directed by Steven Speilberg who won the Best Director Oscar.
- Stars Tom Hanks and Matt Damon, plus other big stars.
- The plot follows a group of US soldiers going behind enemy lines at D-Day to bring back a soldier whose brothers have all been killed in action.
- Won 5 Oscars.
- Won Golden Globes for 'Best Motion Picture' and 'Best Director'.
- This is a film about the D-Day landings in WWII.
- The first 20 minutes of this film are famed for the accurate depiction of modern warfare.
- This is a very highly rated movie, regularly in the 'top 100 movies lists.

The information that you choose to include in your synopsis will depend on the platform. It is important to convey what the film is about - but if you can pack the information in whilst doing so - all the better.

E.g. 'Tom Hanks stars in Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning WWII epic following a band of US soldiers as they venture behind enemy lines during D-Day to bring back a soldier whose brothers have all been killed in action.'

This example synopsis includes numerous reasons why a viewer would want to watch this film: a big name star ('Tom Hanks'), an acclaimed director ('Steven Spielberg'), major awards ('Oscar-winning'), a popular genre (WWII), it includes an encouraging descriptor ('epic'), and it details the crucial plot outline without giving away any twists ('following a band of US soldiers as they venture behind enemy lines during D-Day to bring back a soldier whose brothers have all been killed in action'). That's a lot to fit into a single sentence!

Beware of Spoilers

There is a fine line between detailing the basic plot developments in a TV episode, and dropping a major spoiler on a shock series finale. Think before you write! Do not give away major events, deaths, shock returns, or any such valuable plot information. Even if the plot twists have featured all over the media, and you are aware of them, do not assume that dramatic plot events are common knowledge. The viewers will not love you for telling them who wins in 'Game of Thrones'!

Check, then check again!

Take extra care to be sure you have checked and double-checked your writing for errors - spelling, grammar, punctuation and the accuracy of the information included. Synopses will be uploaded to a platform, and may be syndicated around the world. Any errors will proliferate, so you need to get this right the first time - every time. Check the ID of the asset, to make sure that you have the correct one - some titles crop up dozens of times in Film and TV - you want to make sure you are writing the synopsis for the correct film - not the 1958 original, or the cheesy straight-to-video remake! Lastly - check the length of the synopsis. It's much better to be a few characters short of a limit, than a few over - some systems will simply 'guillotine' at the character limit, chopping a synopsis mid-sentence.

Remember, the time it takes consumers to make a decision is measured in milliseconds, and synopses play a crucial role in converting passive browsers into active viewers. Synopses are almost the final step in the long and complex process of taking media from studios to consumers - so be sure to make it count!

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