

PPW Zebulon Writing Contest Scoresheet – 2020 Update

Genre: Suspense

Category: Mystery/Suspense/Thriller

Scoring:

- 5 = Outstanding; of publishable standard
- 4 = Good; above average; needs minor rewrites
- 3 = Average; needs some revision
- 2 = Fair; some elements missing; shows promise
- 1 = Recommend significant rewrite.
- 0 = Element is completely absent.

A note on scoring: Only if an element is entirely missing should it receive a score of 0. In all other cases, the minimum score should be 1, "Recommend significant rewrite."

MANUSCRIPT PAGES: (please judge ONLY the manuscript pages and do not include insights or other aspects of the story or characters you learned from the synopsis.)

The Opening Scene

1. HOOK. Is the opening scene compelling? Does it make you want to read more?
2. SETTING. Does the author provide a sense of time and place (without overdoing the description)?
3. PROBLEM. Does the opening introduce the conflict and/or themes of the book? Does the story start in the right place?

Characterization

4. MAIN CHARACTERS. Are they interesting and/or sympathetic? Are they multidimensional, with weaknesses and strengths at least implied?
5. SECONDARY CHARACTERS. Are they well developed? Do they enter the plot naturally and unobtrusively? Are they believable and necessary? If there are no secondary characters, is this a logical and reasonable beginning for this particular story? (If so, give the entrant 3, 4, or 5 points. Do not penalize them unduly.)
6. PORTRAYAL. Are characters distinct, described by more than just their physical traits and apparel?

7. CHARACTER VOICE. Is each character's voice consistent? Is the voice appropriate for his/her age, background, education, ethnicity, social standing, etc.?

Dialogue and Narrative

8. BALANCE. Do dialogue and narrative flow together seamlessly? Or does one unnecessarily dominate the other?
9. DIALOGUE. Does it read naturally for the time and place? Does it reveal information and personality about the characters? Does it move the story forward? Does it avoid obvious and awkward info dumps?
10. NARRATIVE. Does it move the story forward? Does it avoid unnecessary exposition and info dumps?
11. POINT OF VIEW. Is the POV handled appropriately? Are POV transitions appropriate? Do POV transitions flow naturally or do they interrupt the flow of the story?

Pacing and Conflict

12. PACE. Does the story move along at an appropriate pace for the genre via language, dialogue, and action? Does sentence structure and length vary?
13. FLOW. Does each scene have a clear relationship to the scenes that precede and follow it? Do scene breaks make sense, or do they leave the reader confused about where and/or when they are?
14. CONFLICT. Is the conflict compelling to the reader as well as forcing the character into action? Is the conflict appropriate for the type of story/genre? Does the character try to resolve the conflict in a compelling manner?
15. PLOT. Is it plausible? Is there enough initial conflict, intrigue, and momentum in the submission to pull the reader into the book?

Style and Technique

16. MOOD/TONE. Does the feeling or atmosphere created evoke the appropriate response in the reader? (For example: sorrow, laughter, sympathy, fear, etc.)
17. EMOTION. Does the author connect with the reader on an emotional level? Do the characters experience appropriate emotional reactions for their situations? Are the stakes high enough? Is the emotion powerful and visceral?

18. **STYLE.** Is the voice interesting? Has the author avoided the overuse of adjectives and adverbs, and is the work free of cliché? (Or if the author does overuse adjectives, adverbs, and cliché, does it work well in the context of the story and voice?)
 19. **SENSES.** Has the author used all five senses (taste, touch, sound, smell, sight) to create a clear and vivid experience?
 20. **SHOW AND TELL.** Does the balance between showing and telling work? Is the story active instead of passive?
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Scoring - Essential Element to Include:

- 5 = Outstanding; of publishable standard
- 4 = Good; above average; needs minor rewrites
- 3 = Average; needs some revision
- 2 = Fair; some elements missing; shows promise
- 1 = Recommend significant rewrite.
- 0 = Element is completely absent.

A note on scoring: Only if an element is entirely missing should it receive a score of 0. In all other cases, the minimum score should be 1, "Recommend significant rewrite."

Scoring – Avoidable Elements to Avoid

- -5 = Unacceptable; elements overshadow synopsis
 - -4 = Recommend significant rewrite.
 - -3 = Fair; some elements present; shows promise
 - -2 = Average; some revision necessary
 - -1 = Good; minor rewrites
 - 0 = Avoidable element is completely absent.
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The Synopsis (Only. Do not include insights or other aspects you learned from the manuscript pages)

SHOULD INCLUDE

1. **NARRATIVE ARC.** Is the plot well defined, including the stakes? Are right characters introduced and developed with goals and motivations? Does the synopsis clearly define the entire storyline?

2. **ACTIVE VOICE.** Is the synopsis written in the active voice and third person? Does the story flow, or is it just a series of plot points? Is the synopsis written in the present tense? The industry standard is for the synopsis to use present tense, no matter what tense is used in the book itself
3. **ORIGINALITY.** Does the concept of the work have freshness? If the idea is not original, is it presented in a fresh way?
4. **PLOT ADVANCEMENT:** Does the author use the characters' emotions and desires to better show how the plot advances? Are the problems presented realistic or manufactured to include conflict? The plot should advance organically, without the reader questioning how the story unfolds. Is the struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist enough to carry the story through to the ending?
5. **CLEAR WRITING:** Is the synopsis too wordy, saying very little in many words? Is it ambiguous? Are you guessing as to plot or characters? A good synopsis tells the story clearly and does not confuse the reader.

SHOULD AVOID

6. **CLUTTER.** Is the story hidden behind unnecessary world building, characters, names, subplots, and details Is the synopsis unclear and confusing?
7. **EDITORIALIZING:** Does the synopsis stop and frame the story? Are there phrases like “in a dream sequence” or “in a flashback” or does it set the scene like “in the villain’s lair”?
8. **BACK COVER COPY.** Does the synopsis read like a movie trailer? Does it highlight action and conflict without explaining the plot or characters? Is it trying to tell the story or sell the book?

Genre (Applies to both the synopsis and manuscript) – Suspense

1. Do the tension and unknowns in the plot keep you wondering what will happen next?
2. Does the story focus more on what will happen in the future, rather than what is happening in the now?
3. Is there an overwhelming sense of danger or tension (but not necessarily action)? Is there a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about how the protagonist will impact the outcome of the story?
4. Does the story include surprises, red herrings, and cliffhangers to heighten the suspense?
5. Does the story include obstacles (known and unknown) that impede the protagonist’s journey? Does the story take you through a high-stakes emotional ride with the protagonist?

6. Are you as the reader one step ahead of the protagonist and his/her knowledge?

Technicalities (Applies to both the synopsis and manuscript)

1. MECHANICAL. Is the submission free from mechanical errors? These include typos as well as spelling and punctuation errors.
2. GRAMMATICAL. Is the submission free of grammar errors? Or, if errors exist, do they contribute to the story and voice, or do they distract from the story?
3. RULES/FORMATTING. Was the entry presented in a professional manner, following the contest rules? This includes: double-spaced, ragged right margin, left justification (except title and chapter headings, which may be centered), one-inch margin all around, 12-pt. Courier New or Times New Roman, numbered pages, and headers optionally including title and page number but not the author name.

BONUS (10 points possible)

1. On a scale of 0-10, how much would you want to read this entire book? 0 means “not at all”. 5 means “I’d like to read on, but I’m not particularly excited about it”. 10 means “I’m as eager to read the rest of this book as I’ve been with some of my favorite published books”.

A total of 180 points is possible.