Functions of a Scene

You’ve felt the pulse-pounding drama of a good story, you’ve turned pages at a furious clip, caught up in a book so real you felt as though it was happening to you. What makes that story, book, or essay come to life? Strong, powerful scenes.

Writing is a wildly creative act, and therefore often seems to defy rules and formulas. Just when a rule seems agreed upon, some writer comes along to break it. While there is a formula to scene-writing, it’s not straightforward. It’s not like a paint-by-numbers kit, where you fill in the listed colors and voilà, you have a perfect painting of dogs playing poker, in all the right proportions. The scene-writing formula is more like the messy spontaneity of cooking: You start with the ingredients the recipe calls for, but you work them in creatively, and variations on the main ingredients yield different, even surprising, results.

The only certain result you want is to snare the reader’s attention with your very first sentence. Since writing competes with the fast-paced, seductive intensity of television and movies, your challenge is to write engaging scenes.

THE SCENE DEFINED

So what is a scene, exactly? Scenes are capsules in which compelling characters undertake significant actions in a vivid and memorable way that allows the events to feel as though they are happening in real time. When strung together, individual scenes add up to build plots and storylines.

The recipe for a scene includes the following basic ingredients:

• Characters who are complex and layered, and who undergo change throughout your narrative

• A point of view through which the scenes are seen

• Memorable and significant action that feels as if it is unfolding in real time

• Meaningful, revealing dialogue when appropriate

• New plot information that advances your story and deepens characters

• Conflict and drama that tests your characters and ultimately reveals their personalities
- A rich physical setting that calls on all the senses and enables the reader to see and enter into the world you’ve created

- A spare amount of narrative summary or exposition

Arguably, the one thing in that list that makes a scene a scene is action—events happening and people acting out behaviors in a simulation of real time—but well-balanced scenes include a little bit of everything. Mixing those ingredients together in varying amounts will yield drama, emotion, passion, power, and energy; in short, a page-turner. Some scenes need more physical action, while others may require a lot of dialogue. Some scenes will take place with barely a word spoken, or with very small actions. Other scenes may require vivid interaction with the setting. As you make your way through this book, you will get a better grasp of the power of the scene and how to use it to achieve your desired effects.

Here are more complex scene considerations:

- Dramatic tension, which creates the potential for conflict in scenes
- Scene subtext, which deepens and enriches your scenes
- Scene intentions, which ensure characters’ actions are purposeful
- Pacing and scene length, which influence the mood and tone of individual scenes

These latter ingredients deepen your scenes and help you take them beyond the perfunctory. Dramatic tension will make the reader worry about and care for your characters and keep her riveted to the page. Subtext can build imagery and emotion into the deeper layers of scenes so that your writing feels rich and complex. Scene intentions help to guide your characters and take them through changes in as dramatic a way as possible. By pacing your scenes well and choosing the proper length for each scene, you can control the kinds of emotional effects your scenes have, leaving the reader with the feeling of having taken a satisfying journey.

ANATOMY OF A SCENE

To help clarify how all of the elements just discussed function within a scene, here is a complex snippet of a scene from Joseph Conrad’s richly layered short story “The Secret Sharer,” which I have labeled to show its parts. Before entering the cabin I stood still, listening in the lobby at the foot of the stairs. [First-person point of view.] A faint snore came through the closed door of the chief mate’s room. The second mate’s door was on
the hook, but the darkness in there was absolutely soundless. [Physical setting that invokes one of the senses: hearing.] He, too, was young and could sleep like a stone. Remained the steward, but he was not likely to wake up before he was called. I got a sleeping suit out of my room and, coming back on deck, saw the naked man from the sea sitting on the main hatch, glimmering white in the darkness, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. [Action that provides a sense of real time.] In a moment he had concealed his damp body in a sleeping suit of the same gray-stripe pattern as the one I was wearing and followed me like my double on the poop. Together we moved right aft, barefooted, silent.

“What is it?” I asked in a deadened voice, taking the lighted lamp out of the binnacle and raising it to his face.

“An ugly business.” [Dialogue.]

He had rather regular features; a good mouth; light eyes under somewhat heavy, dark eyebrows; a smooth square forehead; no growth on his cheeks; a small brown mustache, and a well-shaped round chin. His expression was concentrated, meditative, under the inspecting light of the lamp I held up to his face; such as a man thinking hard in solitude might wear.

[Detailed physical character description.] My sleeping suit was just right for his size. A well-knit young fellow of twenty-five at most. He caught his lower lip with the edge of white, even teeth.

“Yes,” I said, replacing the lamp in the binnacle. The warm heavy tropical night closed upon his head again.

“There’s a ship over there,” he murmured.

“Yes, I know. The Sephora. Did you know of us?”

“Hadn’t the slightest idea. I am the mate of her—” He paused and corrected himself. “I should say I was.”

“Aha! Something wrong?”

“Yes. Very wrong indeed. I’ve killed a man.” [Dramatic tension and plot information.]

“What do you mean? Just now?”

“No, on the passage. Weeks ago. Thirty-nine south. When I say a man—”

“Fit of temper,” I suggested, confidently.

The shadowy, dark head, like mine, seemed to nod imperceptibly above the ghostly gray of my sleeping suit. It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a somber and immense mirror. [Using physical setting to create the desired eerie mood.] Think of the elements illustrated in the marked sections above as crucial ingredients that you want to employ in your own writing. Conrad’s
story is an example of how unique each scene will be, even when you’re using the same essential ingredients. You might choose a different method of creating dramatic tension—like writing in the third-person point of view, opting for more or less dialogue (or none), or using very different actions to create a sense of real time—but you can see that Conrad did, in fact, use all the foundational ingredients of a scene, and held your attention. It is exactly what your scenes need to do for your readers.