

Making Sense of Scenes

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E. L. Doctorow said that writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way. Scenes, then, can be thought of as the segments of the road that an author illuminates a bit at a time. Each scene in a novel should be crafted very deliberately, with a beginning, middle and end that grow not out of the author's whimsy, but out of the needs and desires of a character and of the story itself. Unlike a chapter, which is an arbitrary device, a scene is based on a very specific concept – conflict – and has very specific criteria.

Typically, scenes are built around a character attempting to realize some goal and meeting resistance along the way. That resistance and the struggle between two characters or forces with opposing agendas is CONFLICT. Conflict is the cornerstone of good fiction. In order for the scene to end, that conflict must be resolved in some way, with a character either obtaining his or her specific goal, or being temporarily or permanently thwarted.

For example, let's say that I'm writing a murder mystery and my protagonist, John, needs to find out if a certain young woman, Marion, was involved romantically with the murder victim.

First, every scene must be anchored in a specific TIME and PLACE. The time and place in which a scene occurs can greatly influence its mood and outcome. For my sample scene, I'll make the time noon and the place Marion's penthouse apartment.

Next, every scene should have a VIEWPOINT CHARACTER. Whose perspective is this scene filtered through? It is generally a good idea to limit the viewpoint in a scene to one character's. In my example, let's say the viewpoint character is John.

Each scene should have an INCITING INCIDENT. This is what happened in a previous part of the story to propel us to THIS moment in the story. In my example, let's say that John heard a sexy message from Marion on the murder victim's answering machine.

One important point to make about the inciting incident is that it needs to happen in an EARLIER scene. If your characters act in unmotivated ways, or if the impetus for your scene is found within the scene itself, you will be accused of writing 'episodically.' This basically means that your story doesn't hold together as a cohesive piece but seems like a bunch of unrelated episodes strung together like Christmas lights.

The most important factor in a scene is your character's GOAL. What is your character hoping to accomplish? It is vital that you know what your character wants at all times, not just for each individual scene but for the story as a whole. In my example, as I said, John wants to find out if Marion and the murder victim were romantically involved. John's goal for the BOOK as a whole, of course, is to find out who the murderer is and to catch him/her.

Next, OPPOSITION: What are the forces acting AGAINST your viewpoint character? What is preventing the character from getting what s/he wants in this scene? In my example, let's say that Marion is married and doesn't want to admit to her involvement with the murder victim.

Your character should have some STRATEGY for obtaining his/her goal. Let's say in this scene that John's strategy is to play a copy of the answering machine tape for Marion in order to get the truth out of her. However, if John walks into Marion's apartment, shows her the tape and elicits her immediate confession that she WAS involved with the murder victim, you don't have much of a scene. Your character should meet several layers of opposition and be forced to change strategies a few times until he either overcomes the resistance standing in his way or admits defeat.

Lastly, you have the RESOLUTION. This is how the scene turns out. Does the main character achieve his goal for the scene or is he left frustrated? What consequences does this scene have on the rest of the story as a whole? Let's say that Marion finally buckled and confessed to her relationship with the murder victim. Additionally, she believes that her husband might have known of their relationship. Now John has another suspect to question and this scene has also served as an INCITING INCIDENT to propel John into other scenes.

In constructing a novel, writers generally employ either a simple or complex scene structure. Simple construction dictates one scene per chapter, something seen frequently in straightforward genre pieces, romances, mysteries and thrillers in particular. Complex construction is built around several thematically linked scenes per chapter. These scenes need to function organically and build in intensity during the course of a chapter.

Planning your novel's scenes may help you tackle your book in 'bite-sized' pieces, rather than becoming overwhelmed by the task in its entirety. As in that Doctorow quote I began with, you don't have to know what's around the bend several miles away, as long as you can see what's directly ahead of you and 'drive' accordingly.