

Scene & Sequel by Pam McCutcheon

SCENE DEFINITION: A scene is a unit of conflict lived through, moment by moment, by the character and the reader. As sentences are the building blocks of paragraphs, scenes are the building blocks of your story. Once you master them, you'll have a basic grasp of storytelling.

SCENE STRUCTURE: Each scene has three basic elements:

Goal:

- What does the viewpoint character want in the scene? It can be possession of something, relief from something, or revenge for something.
- Make the scene goal short-range and a single photographable act.
- Sometimes the goal is unstated at the beginning of the scene until the character learns a key piece of information, then the goal becomes clear.

Conflict:

- What is keeping the character from reaching the goal in the scene? The conflict may be external (kidnappers) or internal (friendship vs. duty).
- The conflict should not be too difficult or too easy--it must have meaning.

Disaster/Hook:

- What happens when the goal is achieved or not attained? Each scene (except the last) should end with a disaster or hook to make the reader want to continue reading.
- It must be logical and grow out of the existing character and plot--don't just throw in a monkey wrench because you can't think of anything else.
- A disaster means either the character didn't reach the goal or he/she *did* reach the goal, but something else catastrophic happened.
- A hook (which is not necessarily a disaster) compels the reader to continue. It can be:
 - An event which causes the goal to change.
Jane shows up alive during her murder investigation (so who's dead?)
 - A solution too easily attained.
The villain is defeated in chapter two (so what happens in the rest of the book?)
 - An incident that sparks a question in the reader's mind.
"You realize they're going to lynch us if we don't make it rain." (How are they going to make it rain or escape the lynch mob?)

WRITING THE SCENE:

At the Beginning:

- Establish whose point of view we're in
- Establish how much time has elapsed
- Establish the setting
- Establish the character goal

In the Middle:

- Show the conflict with the goal
- Show character goal, motivation, and/or conflict
- Advance the action/plot
- Plant necessary clues
- Do necessary foreshadowing
- Develop mood or suspense

At the End:

- End with a disaster or hook
- Answer the question, "Does the character achieve the goal?" Three possible answers:

1. No
2. Yes, but...
3. No, and furthermore...

SEQUEL DEFINITION: A sequel is a response or reaction to the disaster or hook. Like mortar, it fills the gaps between the scene blocks and binds the story together. Some scenes fit together well enough that they don't require mortar, so sequels aren't needed after every scene.

Purpose:

- To provide a transition or compression of time or space:
Meanwhile, back at the ranch...
Two days, later...
- To translate disaster into a goal for the next scene:
"Golly gee, Batman, what are we going to do now?"
"That didn't work, so I guess we'll have to try this."

Scene & Sequel (Pam McCutcheon)

- A method for controlling pace and tone to summarize what happens between scenes:

*His injuries weren't as bad as they thought. They were able to save his leg.
Five grueling hours later, he was still stuck in the mud.*

SCENE EXAMPLES (From *My Favorite Husband* by Pam McCutcheon)

Scene: Chapter one, scene one

POV Character: Kelly

Other Characters Present: Fiancé, brother, mother, preacher

Setting: Anteroom of a wedding chapel

Goal: To decide if she should marry Spencer Preston, especially since her first husband was just declared legally dead.

Conflict: Her mother wants her to marry Spencer; her brother doesn't. Kelly waffles.

Disaster/Hook (Does she achieve her goal?) : YES, she makes a decision and marries Spencer, BUT she has to attend her first husband's memorial service before they can begin the honeymoon.

Scene: Chapter one, scene two

POV Character: Kelly

Other Characters Present: Brother, mourners, funeral director

Location: Funeral parlor

Goal: To say good-bye to her first husband, Chaz, without making a big production of it.

Conflict: Nothing is going as she planned, and a couple of people seem determined to turn the memorial service into a circus.

Disaster/Hook (Does she achieve her goal?) : NO, she is unable to say good-bye with dignity AND FURTHERMORE, Chaz shows up at his own funeral. Now she's married to two men....

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