Handout

Writing Techniques to Help Your Scenes Shine

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The basic unit of the story is the scene, and generally there are forty to sixty scenes in a novel. But how do you write a scene? This class will review some helpful tricks and tips to create a compelling scene including discussions of point of view (POV), the importance of the hidden need triplet in creating the character arc, and an amazing technique to keep your reader breathlessly turning pages to the end.

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Tentative Scene List
The Story Template
Spotlight: The Hidden Need Triplet
Onto Structuring the Scene
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Set Up Your Scene
First Scene

TENTATIVE SCENE LIST

You've done some hard work with the 7 Point Model to create a tentative scene list.

You may have found that it was difficult to completely fill in each of the quarters of your story with 10-15 scenes.

A second model, The Story Template, will hopefully give you more insight to continue filling in that list.

I am not going to spend much time in the lecture today on this model since we have a limited schedule and I want to get into how to construct a scene. However,

please go over this material later to help yourself further understand story shape.

If you would like more detail, you can find lots more in my book *The Story Template: Conquer Writer's Block Using the Universal Structure of Story* available on Amazon.

THE STORY TEMPLATE

I mapped out over a hundred stories in detail to come up with this:
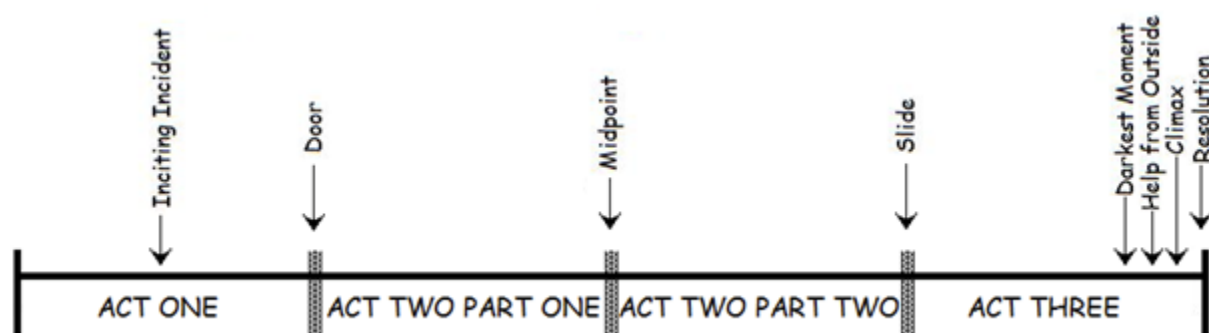
Each quarter of the story has a general type of theme that may help you to further focus your story progression.

Act One — starting to roll

- Ordinary World — the environment your Hero lives in at the start of the story. Establish who is your Hero and why they are frustrated with life.

- Inciting Incident — an event or offer from outside the Hero that offers an opportunity to change.

- Argument — the Hero resists until he can no longer maintain refusal. Note that he must still choose to take the offer, not be forced into it.

- Door — About the 25% mark of the story. The Hero leaves the Ordinary World, metaphorically or physically, to enter the New World of the story.

Act Two/1 — learn how things work

- Three or four increasingly intense encounters with aspects of the New World in which the Hero learns new rules to function here.

- Midpoint — About the 50-60% mark of the story. Flashy event, either a false high or more likely a disaster. This changes the story direction — the Hero realizes things are no longer the same and he is going to have to work hard to get through to the story goal.

Act Two/2 — some progress, but things aren't working well

The most difficult quarter to write because there are many separate parts. That being said there are three general themes that happen here:

- Hidden Need Triplet — a block of three quick scenes that usually occur right after the midpoint. The Hidden Need is the emotional problem that the Hero must solve before he can complete the story goal (Character Arc). The sequence is: the Hidden Need is demonstrated, the Hidden Need is solved, and the Hidden Need is shown to be solved.

- Antagonist Get Stronger — The Villain's actions make the Hero's story goal look increasingly impossible. While the Villain demonstrates bad behavior all through the quarter, there is also a single scene, The How Bad is the Antagonist Beat, close to the end in which the Villain shows maximum power and fear-provoking behavior.

- Protagonist Disintegrates — Hero and his friends increasingly encounter problems and losses from the Villain and from other places that make it look like they are washed up.

  Finally when things look like they can't get any worse, they do.

- Slide — About the 75% mark of the story. This is usually a flashy scene showing a crushing set-back. Blake Snyder in his excellent book *Save the Cat* identifies the "whiff of death" here where a symbolic or real death occurs.

Act Three — let's wrap this up

Things are grim. It looks like the Hero has no chance of achieving the story goal, although he must continue to fight. This act is divided into two parts: preparing for the battle, and then a series of fights with secondary antagonists and finally the confrontation with the Villain.

There are several key components:

- Crazy Plan — using his knowledge of the Villain's weaknesses and his group's own mismatched strengths, the Hero comes up with an out-of-the-box strategy that doesn't look likely, but he has nothing else.

- Darkest Moment — after a series of battles in which the Hero has fought valiantly but progressively loses ground, the end is here. The Hero is about to die literally or figuratively. There is no hope. The Villain has won.

- Help from Outside — A small action from someone or something outside the Hero refocuses him. This help does not cause the protagonist to fight, but encourages him to try once more.

- Climax — final battle. Usually prolonged and flashy. The Hero implements his crazy plan and vanquishes the Villain.

And finally, the closing image.

- Resolution — This final scene or two shows how the protagonist's life will go on now that he has solved the story problem.

SPOTLIGHT: THE HIDDEN NEED TRIPLET (HNT)

Our family is a bunch of science nerds. For my daughter's senior science project, instead of a traditional project she decided to test my story template. She delineated 15 points in the template. Then she chose a bunch of movies, some with sequels and some without, to run through the template grid.

Her findings: all of the films had 14 of the 15 points. However, only the ones with sequels had the 15th point. (The one exception was *Indiana Jones Raiders of the Lost Ark* that didn't have the 15th point, yet had a sequel).

So what was this critical point? THE HIDDEN NEED TRIPLET.

HNT = sequel. No HNT = no sequel.

I'll be the first to say that this study is not decisive. For example, I have found many movies that have an HNT yet don't have sequels.

That being said, I DO think she discovered an important truth here. The HNT is important because it FRAMES THE CHARACTER ARC so that it is easy to see.

The character arc, or the emotional lesson that the Hero learns during the course of the story, is CRITICAL. While amazing plots and fun special effects are attractive, *people love stories ultimately because of the characters*.

The HNT is a shorthand description of a character arc, or in other words an emotional hurt that is healed. This emotional healing goes straight to the heart of your audience.

Don't ever forget that!

See Kickstart #2-#3 handout for how to create a hidden need in your Hero.

ONTO STRUCTURING THE SCENE

Whew! That's a lot of information. Let's move onto some tips for how to write a scene.

These are a few elements that make a big difference in the quality of your writing.

POINT OF VIEW (POV)

Point of View is something you probably learned about in elementary school, but for writers, handling this correctly will make your ms stand out. Let's do a quick review:

First person: Personal POV

Advantages:

- Immediacy.
- Close bonding of reader to one character.

Disadvantages:

- Difficult to structure story so that one person experiences all story events.
- Technically challenging to maintain throughout the story.

Example:

Despite my better judgment, I decided to go to the amusement park. Not surprisingly, it was a disaster even though I told my friends that I had a great time. I don't think they believed me. They saw how I lost my hat in a

wind tunnel before we'd been there half an hour, and how I threw up on the roller coaster, but I hoped that at least I got points for being cheerful.

Third Person Omniscient: Author's POV

Advantages:

- Communicate everything that is going on in the story.

Disadvantages:

- Can be discombobulating for the reader.
- Distances the reader from the characters.

This style was popular in the 19th century when novels started becoming more popular. However as novel writing technique has evolved this style is generally not used.

DO NOT USE OMNISCIENT POV!!!

Example:

Sally was still angry, but she decided she'd be polite. She nodded. "Hi Corey."

Corey looked up. He was surprised that Sally was talking to him. He felt bad he'd been so rude.

Neither of them, while they were working out their argument, knew that a fire had just sparked in the basement and would soon engulf the house.

Third Person Objective: Camera's POV

Advantages:

- Focuses on one character at a time.
- Popular POV in many published novels.

Disadvantages:

- Can be distancing: tends to describe (telling) events rather than immediately experience the events.

Example:

Jenny and Paul sat across from each other at the table in the corner of the ice cream parlor. Jenny was nervous because Paul was so charming, and she didn't want to say anything wrong. She twirled the long silver spoon in her hand. After a moment she noticed her chocolate ice cream was melting,

so she neatly took a large bite of the icy treat. It suddenly triggered a transient trigeminal spasm, and she grimaced.

Third Person Deep/Penetrating: Character's POV

Advantages:

- Exploits the best strength of the novel — deep understanding of characters.

Disadvantages:

- May take some study to learn this technique.
- You may think you are writing deep when in fact you're using objective POV. Make sure you know the difference.

Example:

At the corner table of the Double Dip Jenny caught Paul's wink, and she felt those familiar butterflies. Darn it, why did she keep falling apart like this? She dug her spoon into her ice cream so Paul wouldn't see that he unnerved her -- and shuddered a moment after the ice cream went down. She waited for the headache to pass, trying not to notice that Paul was staring at her.

NOTE:

If you are unsure about your POV techniques, I HIGHLY recommend you read Jill Nelson's *Rivet Your Reader with Deep Point of View* and/or my book *Point of View (POV): Fiction's Powerful Emotional Bonding*.

SET UP YOUR SCENE

I like to think of each scene as a mini-story with a main character, a goal, conflict, and a disaster ending. This structure keeps the story moving forward.

It's a good idea to take five minutes before you start writing your scene to outline it. I put this outline at the top of the page:

POV:

GOAL:

CONFLICT:

DISASTER:

POV: Which character are we going to be following in this scene? Hint: it's usually the character who will be most changed by the scene.

GOAL: what is the character trying to accomplish? Say this in one sentence.

CONFLICT: Make a list of about four internal and external problems that will occur as the POV character tries to accomplish the goal.

DISASTER: End the scene with a disaster — a YES BUT or a NO AND FURTHERMORE. Do not use YES or NO endings. YES stops the story. NO means the scene could be deleted.

Take a look at my website https://amydeardon.blog/free-downloads/ for a FREE article (The Scene-and-Sequel Technique) that explains this concept in more detail.

FIRST SCENE

You want your story beginning to sparkle.

Remember that you only have a few pages to grab your reader's attention. If your reader isn't patient, you might have only one page, or one paragraph, or even just one line before the reader turns away.

Intrigue and Invite

Consider these possible opening lines:

- He hadn't thought dying would be like this.

- Sadie didn't know it at the time, but Brandon's entering through the side window, rather than the door, would change her life.

- The pin cushion was from the nineteenth century, delicate brocade caught up in a flirty twist at the top.

These lines all describe a situation that is easily understood and promising that something interesting is going to happen soon.

These lines also invite the reader to join the story by letting him share observation and emotional reaction with someone in the book.

Look up "novel opening lines" to get a sense for great ways to open your story that invite the reader to join in.

<u>Don't Bore or Confuse</u>

A frustrating beginning for a reader is one with a lot of repetitive description and/or a lot of emoting and/or a lot of confusing action with no context.

When you start with a droning narrative, you are not inviting the reader to join in. It's like your Uncle Melvin at Thanksgiving who dominates the conversation. In your manuscript your reader understands from the first paragraph that "it's cold" or "your heroine is anxious." He doesn't need to keep hearing that for three pages. No, your reader wants your story to kick into gear right away!

<u>Character Empathy</u>

I believe that the underlying reason people love stories is that they can *become* other people with different ways of solving problems.

You can do this right from the beginning by using one or more of these principles in your first scene:

- Create sympathy – your character suffers from a physical problem, an injustice, or a loss.

- Put him in jeopardy – physical or emotional.

- Make him likeable – we all like positive people.

Even though you'll probably have more than one character in the scene, make sure you FOCUS on only one so that the reader can interpret events through his eyes and root for him.

Don't make the jeopardy too extreme or the reader won't want to engage with your story. For example, someone getting a papercut is endearing. Someone being slashed by Jack the Ripper is too much.

Make sure you include the context of what's going on rather than just events. Use your character's POV to interpret events for your reader.

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OPENING SCENE EXERCISES

😀 1. Use the scene outline to structure your opening scene.

POV:

GOAL:

CONFLICT:

DISASTER:

😀 2. Come up with 1-3 possible opening lines.

😀 3. Write your scene to set up WHO is your POV character and WHAT they're trying to accomplish. Write how he deals with each obstacle. Finish with a YES BUT or a NO AND FURTHERMORE ending that somehow makes the situation worse.