

9. CONSTRUCTING A SCENE

The basic unit of fiction is not the sentence or the paragraph, but the scene.

Every scene in a story has both a verbal and a nonverbal content. The verbal content may be a young man fervently courting a girl, or the President of the United States deciding whether to go ahead with a nuclear attack on a biological-warfare research center.

The nonverbal content is concealed in the way you present the scene: You want your reader to think that the young man is touchingly awkward, or obnoxiously crude; that the president is a shallow twerp or a deeply sensitive man facing a terrible decision.

In effect, you are like an attorney presenting a case to the jury: You supply the evidence, and the jury supplies the verdict. If *you* tell us that the young man is touchingly awkward, we may well disbelieve you. But if you show us his awkward behavior, and *we* say, "Aw, the poor lunk!" – then your scene has succeeded.

Every scene presents a problem of some kind for one or more characters, and shows us how the characters deal with that problem. That, in turn, shows us something about the characters and moves the story ahead.

The key is knowing what you want to show your reader about your characters and their problems. Once you know that, everything else follows pretty easily.

So consider what's going on in your own story. What do you want your reader to think about your heroine? That she's shy but determined? That she thinks no man could ever love her? That she's perceptive about other women but baffled by men? Whatever those traits may be, you should be able to think of logical, plausible events that could force her to show them to us.

In some cases, your plot will give you some automatic scenes. If your heroine is flying from New York to Frankfurt, maybe her seatmate is an attractive man who studiously ignores her; maybe the German customs people give her a hard time but she insists on her rights; maybe the heroine sees the attractive man greeted by a woman he seems to dote on even though the perceptive heroine can see the woman despises him. And so on.

How long should a scene be? Long enough to make its point. A scene may run to just a sentence or two, or it may take up 20 pages. When it ends, we should know more about the characters involved, and their problems should have increased. This doesn't mean endlessly increasing gloom, but it means that even a success only clears the way for a more stressful scene to come. The hero may disarm the terrorist bomb in the daycare center, but the resulting publicity will make him a marked man; now the terrorists will try to kill him or his loved ones.

How many characters should take part in a scene? As few as possible. Even a debate in Congress isn't going to involve every last representative.

Here's a tip in this connection: If your plot demands a fairly large cast – for example, your hero is the commanding officer of an infantry platoon, or the headmistress of a girls' school – don't introduce a whole mob of characters at once. Bring in your protagonist first, in a scene that demonstrates the character's key traits (courage, leadership, self-hatred, whatever).

Then bring in each of the supporting characters in a scene that lets them display their key traits as well, while deepening our understanding of the protagonist.

This way we build up interest in the story by building up interest in the varied and complex characters. Tolkien does it in *The Lord of the Rings*; Kurosawa does it in *Seven Samurai*.

Assignment:

Here's an exercise I've found useful with my fiction-writing students. I give them about 30 minutes to take the following elements to construct a scene that dramatizes the elements and leads to a decisive resolution:

- A taxi and public-transit strike that's completely tied up downtown traffic
- Donald Benson, a 35-year-old businessman: male chauvinist, aggressive personality, with business troubles
- Helene Williams, his 22-year-old secretary: insecure in her new job, able to make friends easily, knows the city well
- The need to get Donald to a hotel out at the airport to make a crucial presentation to a potential investor from Los Angeles; the investor will be flying out in four hours.

Give yourself half an hour to write such a scene, so that the reader will finish it knowing all this information. I predict you'll be amazed at how quickly you can produce such a scene, and at how it leads logically to another scene.

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