



# CREATING COMPELLING SCENES

A down and dirty guide to the foundational  
elements of writing compelling scenes.

[tinaradcliffe.com](http://tinaradcliffe.com)



# ELEMENTS OF A SCENE

Emotion

MRU

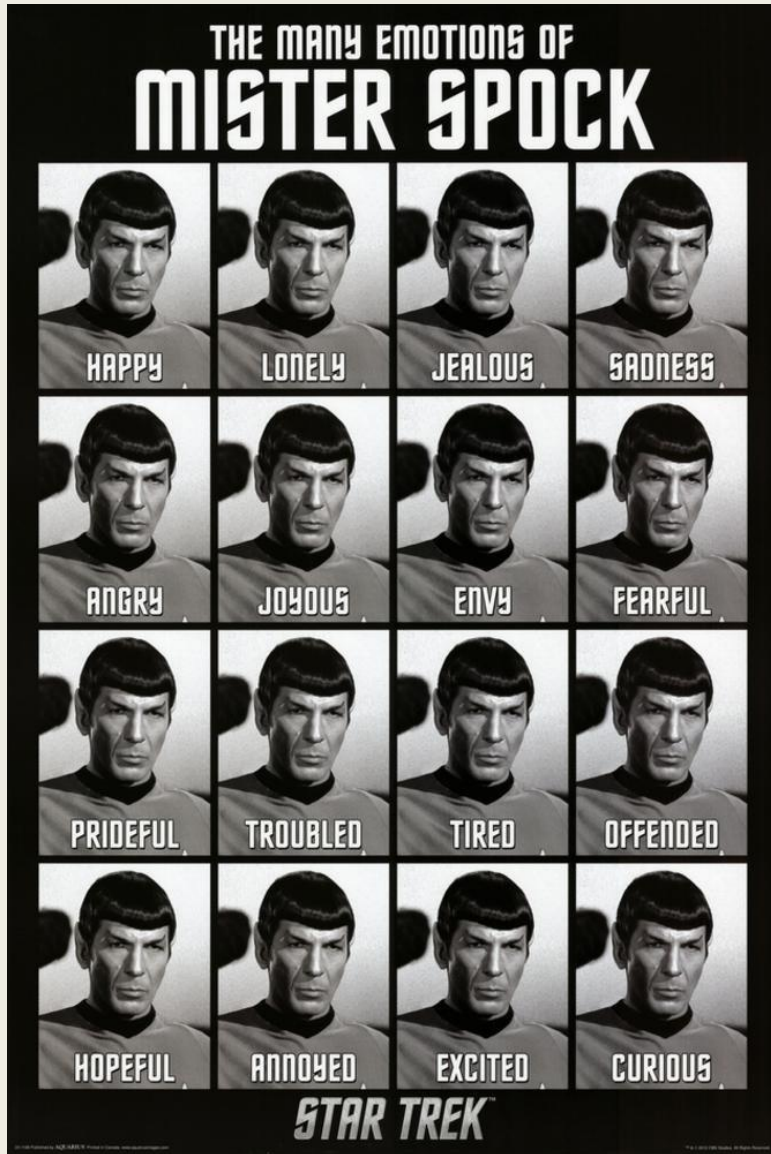
Scene

Sequel

Setting the Scene

And...Scene Problems

# The Elements of a Scene



We read to FEEL and the single most important element of your story and thus, your scene, is

**EMOTION.**

# EMOTION

## The Basic Emotions

1. Fear
2. Joy
3. Love
4. Sadness
5. Surprise
6. Anger

The job of emotion is to communicate a **response** and to organize our next **action**.

Emotion is triggered by an emotional identity or connection to a stimulus. That means your character must care about the stimulus.

**STIMULUS = TRIGGER**  
**EMOTIONS = REACTION**

Response or reaction is always in chronological order: (FAS)

Feeling (always occurs)

Action (usually occurs)

Speech (does not always occur)

# EMOTION Continued

A SIGNAL marks when an emotion begins and ends.

What are signals?

- Facial expression
- Musculoskeletal response (response of our arms, legs, hands, muscles, etc.)
- Autonomic response (regulates bodily functions such as the heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal)
- The impulse to make a noise

Use more than one signal when you are writing emotional responses in your characters. This is a terrific way to strengthen your SHOW don't TELL skills!

Signals don't tell us the source of the emotion, but it can often be figured out by the context.

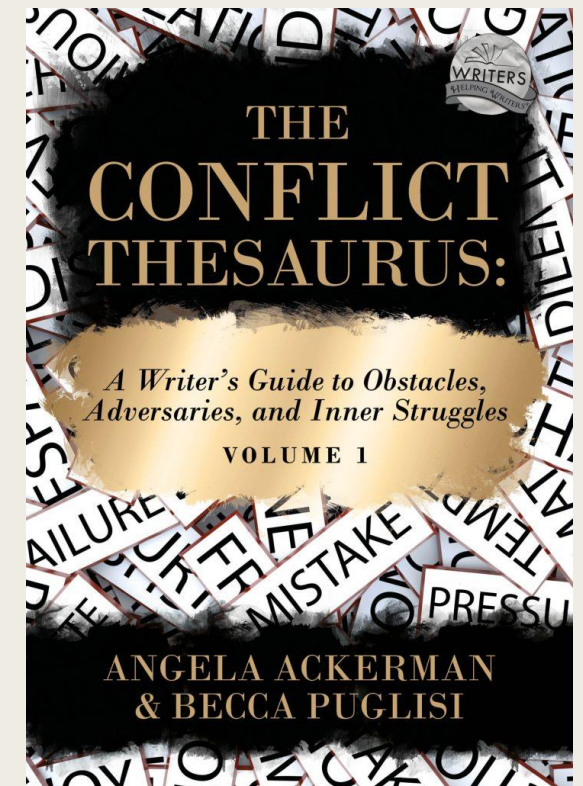
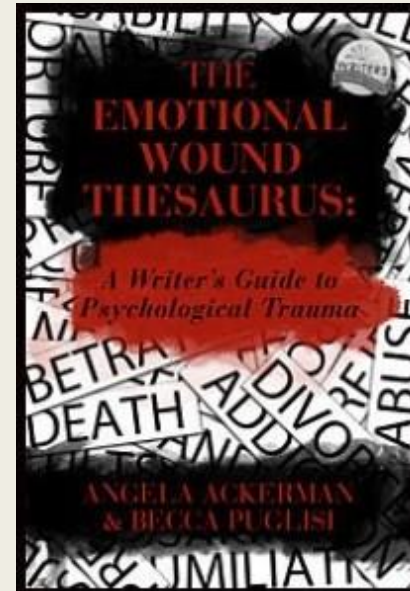
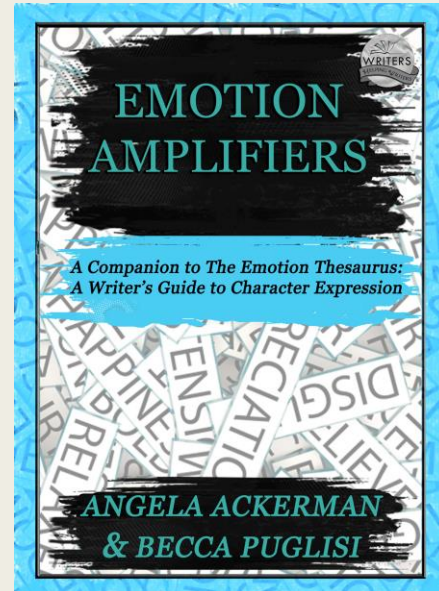
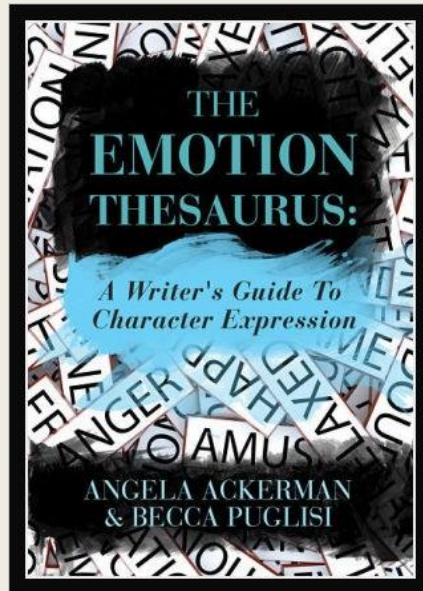


*It's important to remember that emotions are a subconscious response.*

*Or.... Knowing there is nothing to fear doesn't make the fear go away.*

# Emotion cont.'

*The Emotion Thesaurus Series by Ackerman & Puglisi*



# Emotion Tips

## Shelly Thacker

- Emotion on Every page
- Your job in the first 50 pages is to get the reader emotionally involved
- End (chapters/scenes) on a note of uncertainty, tension and doubt
- Where do you stop reading for the day? Approach a book with the knowledge that the end of chapter/scene is your weak link.

## Vince Mooney

### The Art of Rewards per Page

- Scoring the page by page reading experience based on the rewards a writer gives a reader.
- Includes;
  1. Give the reader new experiences
  2. Five-sense copy
  3. An expanded array of emotion
  4. Anticipatory Events where the reader looks forward to the resolution
  5. Make AEs happen sooner than the reader expects
  6. Provide factoids
  7. Sparkles--the poetic use of words
    - - fresh and unique ways of expression
    - -a selection of words the reader has never heard or seen of before
  8. Quips. Quotes and Wisecracks
  9. Crystal clear writing.



# More Emotion Tips



Events in your story have no meaning or value, EXCEPT as they relate to your characters. The value or meaning is how your characters react or have feelings about the event.

Events are external -> Emotional reactions are internal and/or external. One cannot exist without the other and they interact to move the story forward.



# MRU

Motivation Reaction Units- Dwight Swain

[Stimulus ->Effect->Character reaction] = One Motivation Unit

**Stimulus creates effect which creates reaction. A Domino effect = MRU**

Story is created with a succession of MRU.

Every unit = change of some sort.



# MRU cont.'

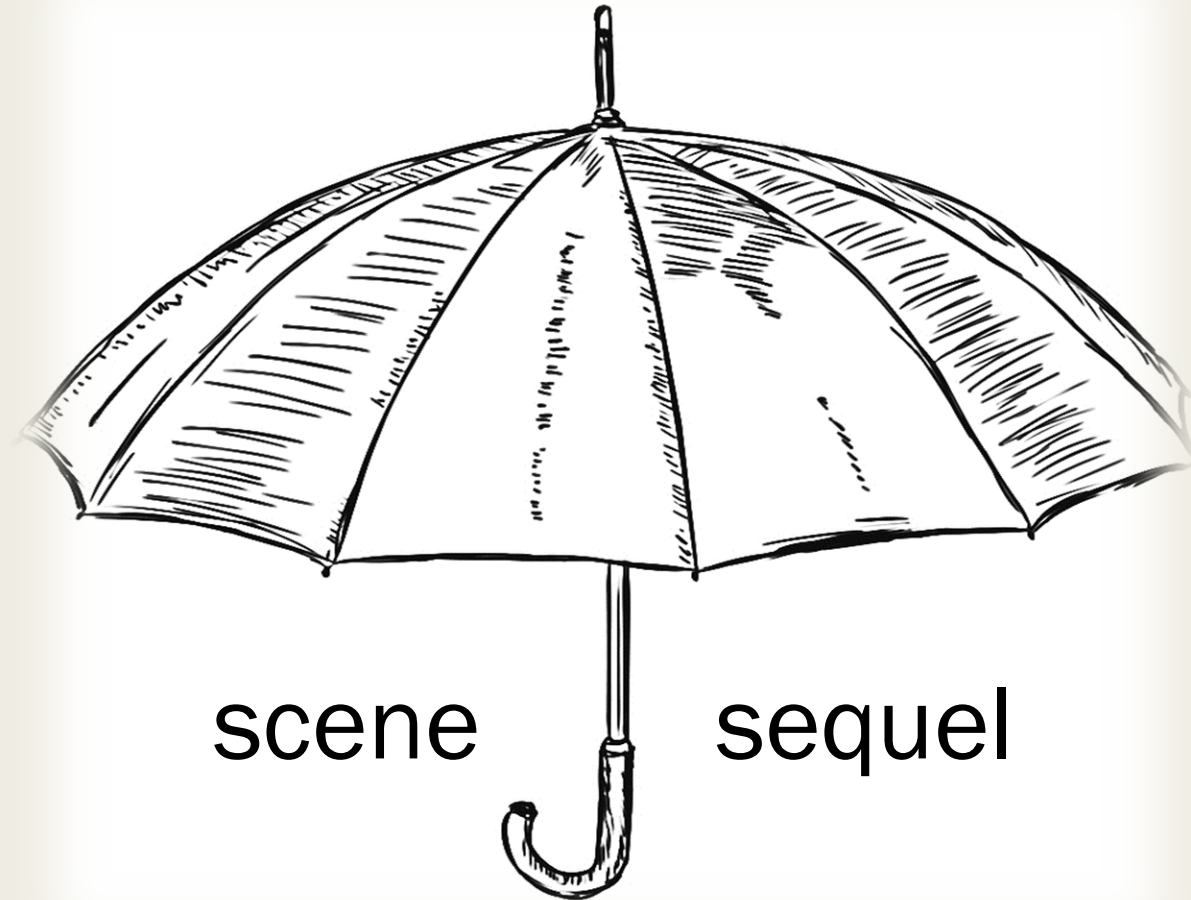
MRU = Motivation Reaction Units

Remember that the motivating stimulus must:

1. Have meaning to your character
2. Demand a response
3. Move the story forward

**Tip:** When deciding whose point of view (POV) the scene will be in, it's important to choose the character who will have the most emotional response to the motivating stimulus, so you will create the biggest emotional payoff.

# The Scene Umbrella



# Scene and Sequel

“The large-scale structure of a scene is extremely simple. Actually, there are two possible choices you can make for your scene structure. Dwight Swain calls these two choices “scenes” and “sequels”. This is horrendously confusing, since both of these are what most ordinary people call scenes.”

- Randy Ingermanson

Here is Jack Bickham’s definition:

“Most successful fiction today is based on a structure that uses a series of scenes that interconnect in a very clear way to form a long narrative with linear development from the posing of the story question at the outset to the answering of that question of the climax.”

# Scene & Sequel

## Story is a continuous chain of Scene & Sequel

Common practice as a writer tells us that SCENE (ALL CAPS) is a passage of writing separated by ### or double spaces.

Scene changes at the following times:

A new POV character

A change of time

A change of place

**But the concept of scene and sequel digs deeper into the structure of the SCENE. From this point forward when I mention scene, I am talking about scene (lower case) in the scene and sequel process.**

# Scene = Stimulus Emotional Response

Scene functions to create emotion, move the story forward and create interest. Think of them as units of conflict.

Structure of Scenes:

**Goal**-protagonist wants something

**Conflict** -opposition

**Disaster**-hook, unexpected development

GOAL

CONFLICT

DISASTER

# Scene Tips

**Scenes are LIVE.** No skimming or summarizing the element of time.

No Flashbacks in scene. Show don't tell.

Dialogue and action are primary.

**Every scene asks a question:** Take your scene goal and turn it into a question. Will xx get xx? The character should always be in worse shape at the end of the scene than at the start.

That disaster ending ensures that the reader turns the page. Don't tie up the end of your scene in a bow and tell the reader all is well, you can go to bed. And don't end your scene with the character falling asleep. Make the reader turn the page. Make them stay up all night to read your book.

At the end of each scene consider whether you need to up the stakes.



# Examples of Scene Questions

Scene: Goal-Conflict-Disaster

**Every scene asks a question:** Take your scene goal and turn it into a question.

The last time Christian Gabriel saw a nun walk into a bar, Sister Mary Joseph McGregor had come to drag him back to the orphanage. The twenty-year-old memory was still so sharp, it brought a twinge of pain to the lobe of his right ear. Gabe rubbed absently at the spot and wondered if the petite nun who hovered at the door of his bar was strong enough to drag anyone anywhere. But he never doubted for a moment that she'd come to drag someone back to the path of righteousness. Why else would she be scrutinizing his customers?

- *Hot as Sin Debra Dixon*

# Examples of Disaster Endings

Sequel: Reaction-Dilemma-Decision

Note the varying levels of tension.

## **Disaster**-hook, unexpected development

“Desmond. McKnight.”

His name was Desmond? Oh, yeah. This guy was totally gay. But then he smiled, triggering maximum dimple wattage, and my belly did a flip that went straight south.

Crazy Little Thing –Tracy Brogan

Reel wondered if Robie was still coming after her. She wondered if right now he regretted not killing her. Her phone buzzed. She looked down at the screen. Will Robie had just answered her.

-*The Hit* David Baldacci

# Sequel = AFTERMATH or the Reaction to the Disaster of Scene

Sequel is a regrouping and new plan.

Think of sequel as units of transition that link scenes (lower case).



The structure of sequel:

**Reaction**-Focus in on the number one emotion. Guilt? Fear? Confusion? Anger?

**Dilemma**-Let the reader see protagonist work through their chain of logic.

**Decision**-new goal is formed.

In sequel, a new goal is formed which will take us to the next scene (lower case).

# Sequel Tips

Sequel: Reaction-Dilemma-Decision

Sequels may transition (skip) time.

Sequels are tell not show.

Sequel are often internal.

Flashbacks can be used.

**Sequel ANSWERS the scene question.** The answer is either no and/or a bigger complication.

Swain says the function of sequel is to:

- a. To translate disaster into goal
- b. To telescope reality
- c. To control tempo

Your reader had the excitement of scene, now they see the outcome and the new course of action.

# Scene and Sequel Tips

- If a story is dragging, enlarge scene and decrease sequel
- Fast paced story -> big scenes and short sequels
- Create more angst-> shorter scenes and longer sequels
- Don't write too small. It usually takes a minimum 4 pages or 1000 words in order to get Goal, Conflict and Disaster into a scene.
- Sequel can be presented in as little as a single sentence or a snippet of dialogue or internals.

# Examples of Scene & Sequel Together

Scene: Goal-Conflict-Disaster

Sequel: Reaction-Dilemma-Decision

*The Hard Way* by Lee Child

## Scene ending in disaster:

Like a heart monitor that had been beeping bravely and resolutely against impossible odds had just abruptly gone quiet.

Flatline.

###

## The opening lines of sequel that follows show the new plan:

At ten o'clock in the morning Lane raised his head off the back of the chair and said, "Okay." Then he said it again. "OK." Then he said, "Now we move on. We do what we have to do. We seek and destroy. As long as it takes. But justice will be done...."

The move to Rebel had been prayerful, with the deep awareness that she and the kids needed what the town could offer. A life without the rug being pulled out from under them...again.-**DISASTER**

**Everything would be okay, she reassured herself. Somehow, she'd find her way to the other side of this mess. She had to.-SEQUEL**

-Finding the Road Home Tina Radcliffe

# Examples of Scene & Sequel Together

Scene: Goal-Conflict-Disaster

Sequel: Reaction-Dilemma-Decision

**Maisey Yates *Tough Luck Hero***

**Chapter 20 Disaster at the end of the chapter. HIS POV**

Then she turned and walked out of his house, leaving him there with a broken mug and a broken heart.

**Chapter 21 Sequel at the start of the chapter. HER POV**

Lydia didn't know where she was going. She thought maybe she would go to her house....

It made her wonder. It made her wonder for the first time if perhaps she wasn't a half at all. If maybe, just maybe, she had always been whole.

She just had to let the light in to see it.

**(Note that she is regrouping. You can see that we are now ready for a new Scene: Goal, Conflict & Disaster after this.)**

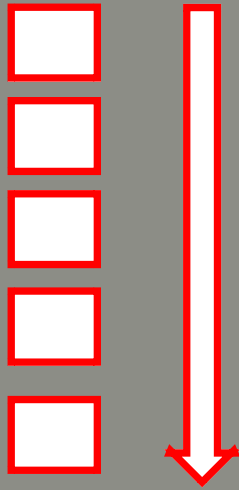


# Scene & Sequel –Let's review

Story is a continuous chain of Scene & Sequel

## THE BIG SCENE UMBRELLA

It holds the chains of  
scene & sequel  
that move your story forward



Scenes are stimulus then response.  
Sequels are aftermath.

Mix and match your scenes and  
sequels in any way you like according  
to your story needs. Your overarching  
SCENE may just have scene. The  
next one may just have sequel. The  
next one could be scene and sequel.  
You can even start with sequel  
according to Swain.

**YOU GET TO DECIDE!!**

# Setting the Scene

**Who-** POV character for the scene

**What-** The scene question

**When-** Ground the reader in the time, day, month year, as needed

**Where-** Location, location

**How-** Word choice & Sensory detail

**This applies to every single scene. Not just your opening scene!**

# Setting the Scene- WHO

**Who-** POV character for the scene

Figure out who's the POV character for that scene and stay in their head from the first sentence of the scene. Make it clear whose head you are in. Channel that character and see, hear, smell, feel, touch the world as that character.

Generally, we use the POV character's name to ground the reader.

He'd been looking forward to that brandy.

Maximilian Westwood did not look up from the Russian missive. Perhaps if he did not meet her gaze, she would go away. The Flower could exit his study by whatever mysterious method she'd entered and leave him in peace.

**A Dance with Seduction –Alyssa Alexander**

# Setting the Scene- WHAT

What- The Scene Question

**Every scene asks a question:** Take your scene goal and turn it into a question.

Five minutes to three in the afternoon. Exactly sixty-one hours before it happened. The lawyer drove in and parked in the empty lot.

*-61 Hours Lee Child*

# Setting the Scene-WHEN

When-Ground the reader in the time, day, month year, as needed

Ground the reader in the emotional aspects of WHEN. Don't neglect the opportunity to use WHEN to show characterization too.

Time of day

Day of the week

Month –weather

Year-contemporary/historical

Richmond, Virginia,

Monday, July 7, 4:10 A.M.

Thou shalt not kill. The shadowed figure squatted in the darkness by Harold Turner's lifeless body, amazed that excitement, not shame, surged. The sense of power and righteousness was nearly overwhelming. God's calling to be the Guardian had never been clearer.

**I'm Watching You Mary Burton**

# Setting the Scene-WHERE

## Where-Location, location

“..physical setting becomes the picture frame within which emotional reaction blooms.”-William Noble.

It's better to under describe with choice evocative words, than to over describe and bore the reader with details they don't need.

### **Ask yourself this about the scene setting:**

- What are the characteristics of the setting? (How can I show we are in Oklahoma not Nebraska?)
- How does the setting affect my POV character/s? (show the setting from their eyes. Not yours.)
- How important are the mood and atmosphere of this scene? And how can I exploit them?

# Setting the Scene-HOW

How?

With word choice & sensory detail

[Regina's Noisy Words](#) by Regina Jennings

[Word by Word -1130 Words that amp up TENSION](#)

by Jessica P Morrell

**The Phrase Finder** by Edward Prestwood (out of Print)

Keep your own journal of words and phrases!

## Regina's Noisy Verbs

|         |         |             |          |
|---------|---------|-------------|----------|
| Bang    | Flip    | Pop         | Splatter |
| Bash    | Flutter | Pound       | Splutter |
| Blare   | Gargle  | Purr        | Squall   |
| Bong    | Gong    | Rap         | Squawk   |
| Bop     | Grate   | Rasp        | Squeal   |
| Bray    | Grind   | Rattle      | Swish    |
| Bubble  | Growl   | Reverberate | Swoosh   |
| Buzz    | Grunt   | Ring        | Tap      |
| Chime   | Gulp    | Rip         | Thud     |
| Chug    | Gurgle  | Roar        | Thump    |
| Clack   | Guzzle  | Rub         | Thunder  |
| Clang   | Hammer  | Rumble      | Thwack   |
| Clap    | Hiss    | Rustle      | Tramp    |
| Clatter | Honk    | Scrape      | Trickle  |
| Click   | Hoot    | Scratch     | Trill    |
| Clink   | Hum     | Screech     | Trumpet  |
| Clomp   | Jangle  | Shuffle     | Twang    |
| Crack   | Jingle  | Sigh        | Wail     |
| Crackle | Knock   | Sizzle      | Whap     |
| Croak   | Moan    | Slam        | Wheeze   |
| Crunch  | Munch   | Slap        | Whine    |
| Ding    | Murmur  | Slosh       | Whisk    |
| Dong    | Peal    | Slur        | Whisper  |
| Dribble | Ping    | Slurp       | Whistle  |
| Drip    | Pipe    | Smak        | Whiz     |
| Drone   | Plink   | Snap        | Yelp     |
| Drum    | Plop    | Sniff       | Yowl     |
| Echo    | Plunk   | Splash      | Zip      |
| Fizz    |         |             | Zoom     |

www.reginajennings.com



# Scene Problems

Writing Around a Scene

Episodic Writing

Tea Scenes

Nothing Happened Syndrome

# Writing Around a Scene

Writing around the scene occurs when a writer leads the reader up to the scene nicely and then stops right on the edge of the precipice.

The next thing on the page is either hours later, the next day, or worse, reflection by one of the characters about the scene that we never saw (this reflection is sequel).

Writers do this because they are afraid they can't write the scene.

**You are not alone in your fears. WRITE THE SCENE.**

**Once again, remember that scenes are live.**

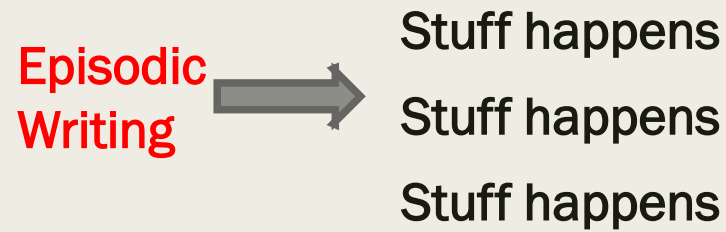
Passage of time techniques are used to avoid the stuff readers skip like sleeping, showering, using the loo. Or unimportant events.

**BUT passage of time techniques must never, ever cheat your reader.**

Graphophobia  
Fear of Writing

# Episodic Writing

“If someone tells you that your story is 'episodic', they mean that your story is a series of episodes, or events, that are very loosely tied together. The "events" crop up one after the other as a way of entertaining the reader, but there is little character growth between one episode and the next. Nor can we easily see how one event grows out of the one before.” –Marg McAllister



Stuff happens doesn't move your story forward.

Episodic writing is scenes without Goal, Conflict and Disaster.

Remember: Stimulus ->Reaction. Every scene creates a setup to move the next scene forward.



# Episodic Writing Tips

## TIPS:

Events in your story have no meaning except as they relate to how your characters react and have feelings about them.

**MAKE THE EVENTS HAVE MEANING FOR YOUR CHARACTERS. SHOW REACTIONS/RESPONSES.**

**PICK YOUR POV CHARACTER RESPONSIBLY.**

Emotion grows out of conflict.

**IF THERE IS NO EMOTION IN A SCENE THEN EITHER CREATE IT OR CUT THE SCENE.**

# Tea Scenes

Tea scenes occur when the protagonist/s are eating, and drinking and nothing happens.

Tea scenes are often a crutch used when the writer has no idea what happens next, and chances are that the writer creates several tea scenes per book.



In his DVD, *Creating Powerful Movie Scenes*, Michael Hauge describes Momentum of the Scene. "At the end of the scene, the hero must be somewhere different than he was at the beginning."

Examples:

- Closer to the goal.
- Further from the goal.
- Met another obstacle.
- Revealed something. (that the protagonist prefers Earl Grey over Chamomile is not a reveal)
- Risked something.

If there is no change occurring in your tea scene, then get rid of the scene or revise to create conflict.

# Nothing Happened Syndrome

The backstory dump.



Your reader's interest is in the future. Not the past. We avoid backstory dumps because they aren't interesting.

“Quit thinking your reader needs to know as much background to read your story as you need to write it.”-  
Dwight Swain

Backstory does not move your story forward. Consider how much history a reasonable POV character would think about, or talk about. When you dump all the information at once, it's like your neighbor who wants to give you the details of their bunion surgery.

**No one cares.**

Backstory is telling not showing. It pulls the reader out and destroys the intimacy of the reader becoming the POV character.

# Nothing Happened Syndrome cont.'

This translates to –your plot is not moving forward.

If Goal, Conflict, Disaster isn't turning on any lightbulbs, here's how a few pros explain it.

A scene should do at least one of the following: Dramatically illustrate a character's progress toward the goal or provide an experience which changes the character's goal. Bring a character into conflict with opposing forces. Provide a character with an experience that strengthens his motivation or changes his motivation. – **Debra Dixon. GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict**

Every scene should have the three O's.

1. An objective: the point of view character wants to accomplish something
2. An obstacle: something needs to get in the way of the objective
3. An outcome: the scene's ending --**James Scott Bell- Revision and Self-Editing**



# Setting the Scene- A Perfect Scene

Something was off. Cara Kryzik was no psychic, but the minute her bare feet hit the floor that morning, she sensed it.

She sniffed the air apprehensively and was met with the sweet perfume from the tiny nosegay of gardenias—her favorites—that she'd placed in a sterling bud vase on her dresser the night before.

Had she overslept? No. The big bells of St. John the Baptist cathedral were ringing the eight-o'clock hour as she descended the stairs from her apartment to her shop one floor below.

Cara shuffled down the narrow hallway to the front of the darkened flower shop. She flicked on the wall switch, and the multitude of thrift-shop chandeliers she'd hung at varying heights from the tall-ceilinged room twinkled to light, their images reflecting from all the mirrors staged around the space. It was a small room, but she thought the chandeliers and mirrors expanded the space visually.

See? She scoffed at her own foolish sense of foreboding. All was well.

**Mary Kay Andrews. Save the Date**

# Self-Editing Your Scenes

Is the scene grounded?

Is my POV clear?

Have I followed up on Stimulus->Response?

Does the new scene reflect what happened in the last one

- In the scene's actions and dialogue

- In my characters internals

Have I used the most evocative words?

Does this scene elicit emotion? How much emotion is on the page?

Is my scene moving the story forward?

# Back to the Beginning

Two questions:

## **1. The “So-What” Factor –Raymond Obsfeld**

When you finish reading a scene, ask yourself, “So what?” Is this scene necessary?” Does whatever happens deserve its own scene? Could the information be placed in one the neighboring scenes?

## **2. Why should I care? –Donald Maas**

We care because the protagonist cares. Our goal is to make the reader emotionally invested. Did you make the reader care?

# Dare to be a Great Writer

The writer does not know what he knows. You must remain with a difficult scene for as long as it takes to dig deeply into yourself and discover more of what you know. You not only complete the scene, but add to your store of writing skill.

The "short breath" writer is facile and easily discouraged. When he exhausts what he knows, he rearranges and never learns anything new. He repeats and re-repeats. The "long breath" writer plunges deeply until he finds what he needs. He emerges from the depths of "self" with new material, new techniques. He learns from himself.

**Dare to be a Great Writer –Leonard Bishop**

# Resources

[Techniques of the Selling Writer](#) –Dwight V. Swain

[Scene & Structure](#) –Jack M. Bickham

[Make that Scene](#)- William Nobel

[Writing the Perfect Scene](#) (article)–Randy Ingermanson

[How to Write a Dynamite Scene Using the Snowflake Method](#) –Randy Ingermanson

[Revision & Self-Editing](#) –James Scott Bell

[Goal, Motivation & Conflict: The Building Blocks of Good Fiction](#) –Debra Dixon (ebook)

[Writing with Emotion, Tension & Conflict](#) –Cheryl St. John

Novelist's Essential Guide to Crafting Scenes –Raymond Obstfeld (out of print)

[How Making Your “Reading Experience’ More Rewarding Can Spell Greater Success-](#) Vince Mooney Seekerville

[Creating Powerful Movie Scenes](#) & [The Heroes Two Journeys](#) –Michael Hauge (streaming)

[The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Expression](#) –Becca Puglisi & Angela Ackerman

# A Final Word...

1. MMV
2. Never stop learning
3. Deconstruct writers you read.
4. It's writing. There is no right way.



**All writing, all the time.**

All the information you need in one place.

The link to the PDF of slides can be found NOW on my website. There is a dedicated tab called ACFW Virginia. It will remain active for 24 hours but is not visible to the public.

<https://www.tinaradcliffe.com/acfwvirginia>

I'll also add a copy of the Hauge/Greene Mashup.

Writer's Inside Edition – August

Questions?

Or feel free to email me at [contact@tinaradcliffe.com](mailto:contact@tinaradcliffe.com)

[Tinaradcliffe.com](http://Tinaradcliffe.com)