



Scene Stealer

Jordan Rosenfeld, Author/ Editor

Show v. Tell

YOU'VE HEARD "SHOW, DON'T TELL."

I PREFER, "DEMONSTRATE, DON'T LECTURE"

LET YOUR CHARACTERS "WALK/TALK" —DON'T LEAP IN TO DO IT FOR THEM. USE PHYSICAL ACTION AND DIALOGUE TO SHOW WHAT THEY DO AND SAY.

LET US GET INSIDE THEIR HEADS

PUT THEM INTO ACTION/SHOW THEM PURSUING A GOAL

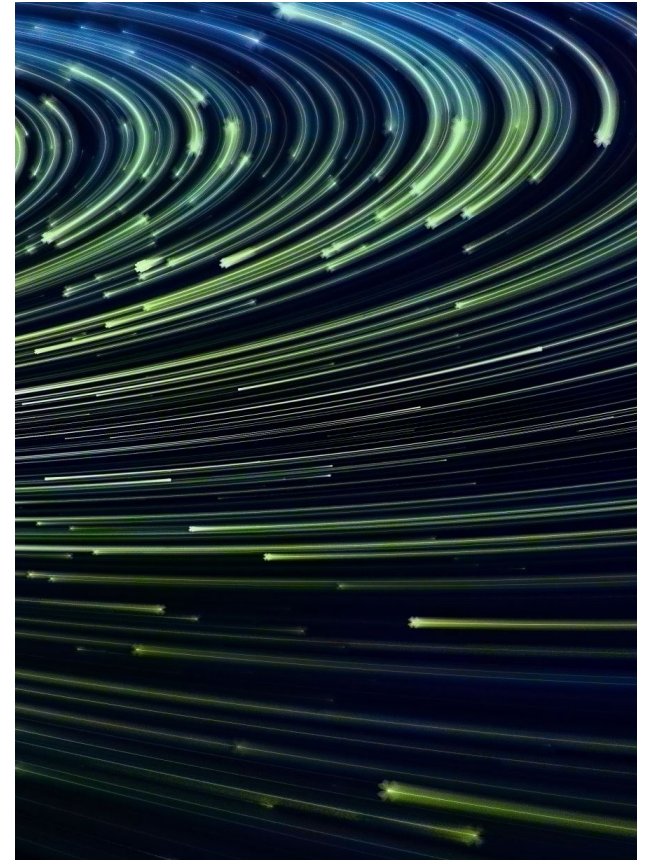
What is a Scene?

A scene is a unit of contained action, which usually takes place in one physical location and time period (except when traversing a landscape or traveling on a plane, train or car).

A scene is a dynamic and engaging demonstration of action/momentum that breaks a plot down into small, manageable bits.

When in scenes, character use “words and deeds” to communicate information and move the story along.

When you feel bored or impatient, the writer has probably dropped out of scene into summary.



Scene Ingredients

Main character,
“protagonist.”

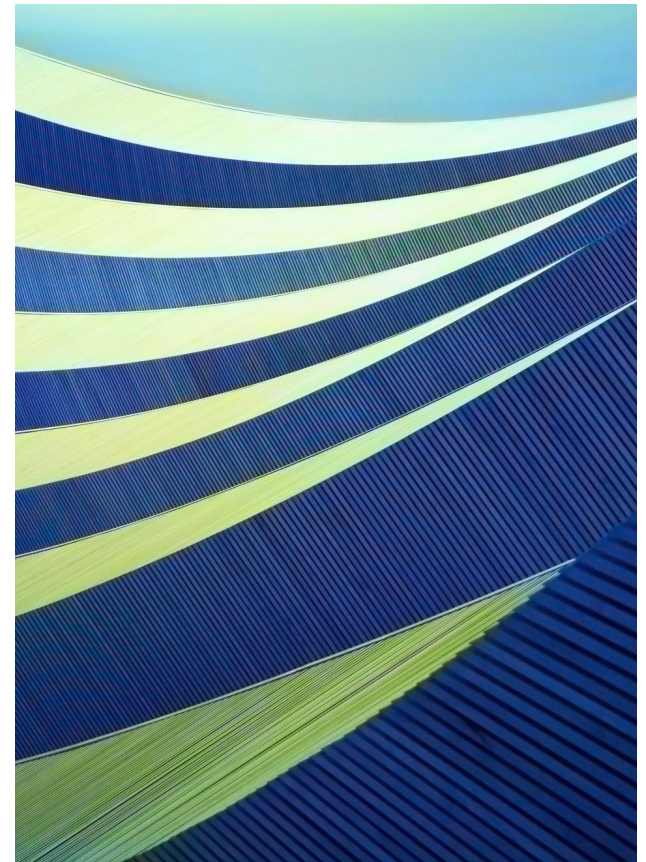
Action/Momentum
(beat-by-beat
unfolding of time)

New Plot
“information” (new
clue, deeper into
story)

Setting (be sure
character interacts
with)

Sensory imagery
(five senses, and
sensory emotion)

Tension (danger,
conflict, uncertainty,
withholding)





Introducing Your Protagonist

Your protagonist is the “hero” of your story (or anti-hero in some cases).

This must be a complex, flawed, but compelling character. You want the reader to understand their motivations and plight enough to root for them.

They should neither be “too perfect” or, as one editor put it, “too dumb to live.”

Give them a trajectory of change—start them out in a place of conflict or discontent, a place of yearning or fear

Give them a goal in every scene.

Action/Momentum

The hallmark of a scene is action, otherwise known as momentum: characters moving through space and time.

Characters engaging in physical action and dialogue

Characters interacting with the setting

Characters undertaking actions instead of the narrator telling us what they are doing.

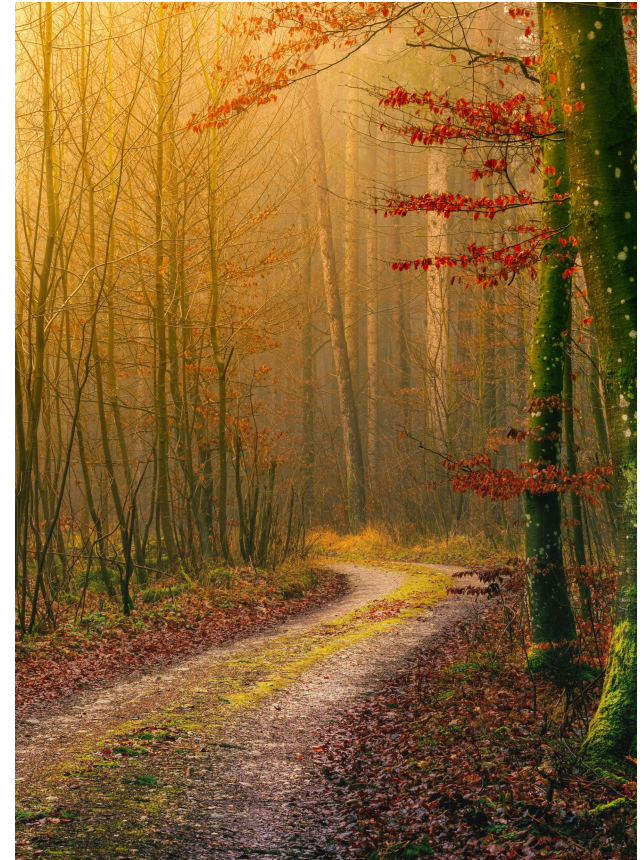
*Then three things happened: Lana **dropped the plate** she was holding, which landed with a crack on the checkerboard tile; **the Carhartt man looked up** over the tops of his sunglasses; and a shock wave of recognition rolled through me. -- **The Hazel Wood**, Melissa Albert*

New Plot Information

- Every scene in your story must pertain to the plot.
- Every scene must offer something new that the reader did not know before.
- It can be character related information: I.e. Someone's true identity, where they were at a point in time, an intention they held, a letter they wrote, etc.
- It can be plot related: The antagonist may throw a curve ball. The protagonist may discover a new lead or clue.
- This new information should have consequences for future scenes
- *We stared at each other, the man and I, and **he saw me remember**. As we locked eyes, I recalled things I'd forgotten: ten years ago, his car had smelled like Christmas trees. He'd ordered pancakes and eggs when we'd stopped for breakfast. **He was the man who'd spirited me away in his blue Buick, the man I'd imagined was my father.***
- *From, The Hazel Wood, by Melissa Albert*

Setting

- Your job is to ground readers in a world they can “see” inside their minds. We need just enough details to make it real but not too much. Examples from “Perfume” by Patrick Suskind.
- **Houses, buildings, rooms**
- “Everything lay ready, the glass basin for the perfume bath, the glass plate for drying, the mortars for mixing the tincture, pestle and spatula...”
- **Geographical locations**
- “For eight hundred years the dead had been brought here from the Hotel-Dieu and from the surrounding parish churches...”
- **Weather and nature**
- At the end of the cave it was pitch-black night even during the day, it was deathly quiet and the air he breathed was moist, salty cool.
- **Time period details**
- In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells of moldering wood and rat droppings...



Sensory Imagery

Characters should have emotions and reactions to the situations they encounter. Use sensory imagery, grounded within the sensations of the body, to communicate emotion.



Ex: I woke up hours later with a feeling of fleet panic, breathing like I'd just come up from underwater. There was something in my ears, a sense of dying sound.



My chest was a bellows with the air squeezed out. The breaths I sucked in were bitter as helicopter seeds.

Tension

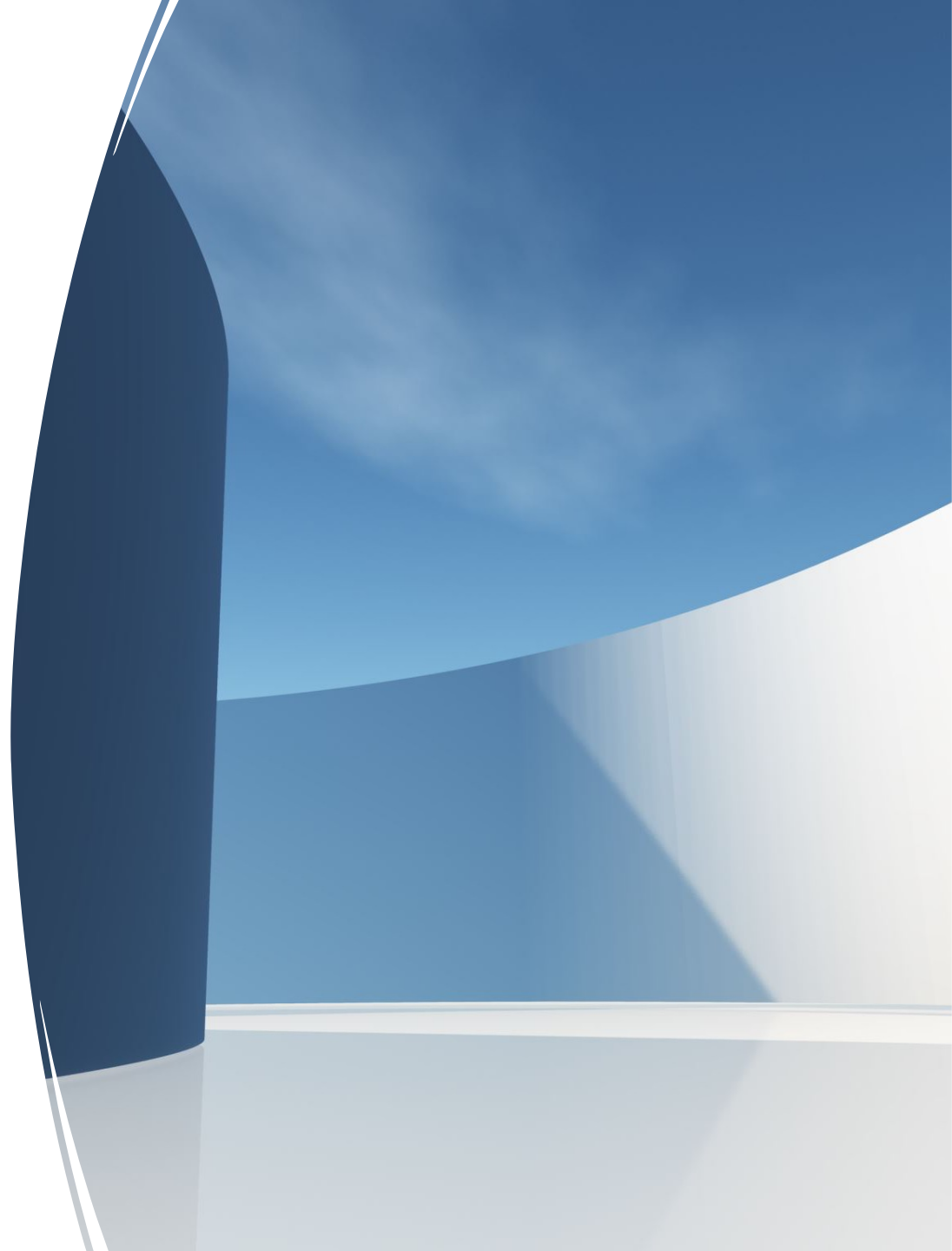
- **Tension.** Opposing forces. Invoke conflict, suspense, withholding, danger, thwarting goals:

"So where do you—" Finch began, then stopped.

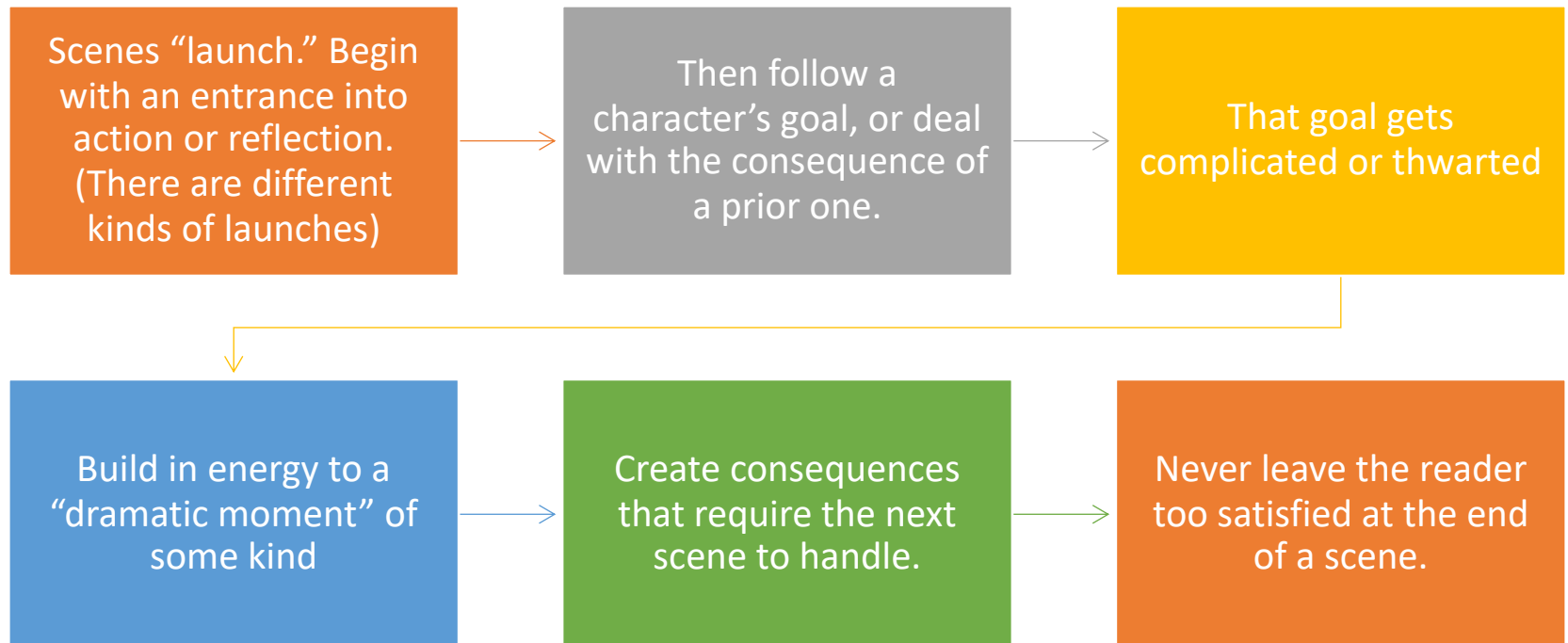
The rental car, parked on the pavement in front of our room, was filled with water. Filled, like a fish tank. The water was a silty swirl you couldn't see through.

A tight, sickly laugh bubbled out of me. It was a reminder, clear as day: the Hinterland was with us every step of the way. We thought we were so damned clever, but wherever we went, it was because they were letting us.

Scene Design



Scene Design



Scene Launch with Action

“I duck under the tape, a voice recorder practically takes my eye out and a noise like an attack dog goes off in my face. I leap before I can stop myself, fists coming up, and hear the burst of fake shutter-clicks from the phone camera.”

—***The Trespasser***, Tana French

- Action engages us immediately. It’s visceral, in the moment, it jumps us into a scene.



Scene Launch with Reflection

“It had taken two weeks for all of them to go, the photographers and the newscasters with their microphones and lights; no longer waiting outside the house, no longer feigning a respectful distance while trampling the flowers left at the roadside. Vivian missed the cameramen least of all.”

Kept Animals, Kate Miliken

Reflection (or any other kind of exposition) offers more of a slow burn, which is useful when coming after intense prior scenes.

Character Goals

Your protagonist must have a goal in every scene

A character's *goal* is a plan to take action and do something integral to the plot.

Plot-specific goals: These are the bigger, overarching goals your characters have for the story itself: to become a wizard; to solve whodunit, to become the first woman astronaut...These are often related to the inciting incident.

Scene-specific goals: These are the smaller goals that the protagonist undertakes in each scene to achieve the plot goal.

Scene Complications

Character goals have to meet with obstacles and complications. Hint: this is what antagonists are for.

Complications can also come from character flaws and accidents, acts of nature and well-meaning people who do bad things.

It is through conflict and tension that we keep the reader's attention but more important, it's how characters gain strength, wisdom and grow.

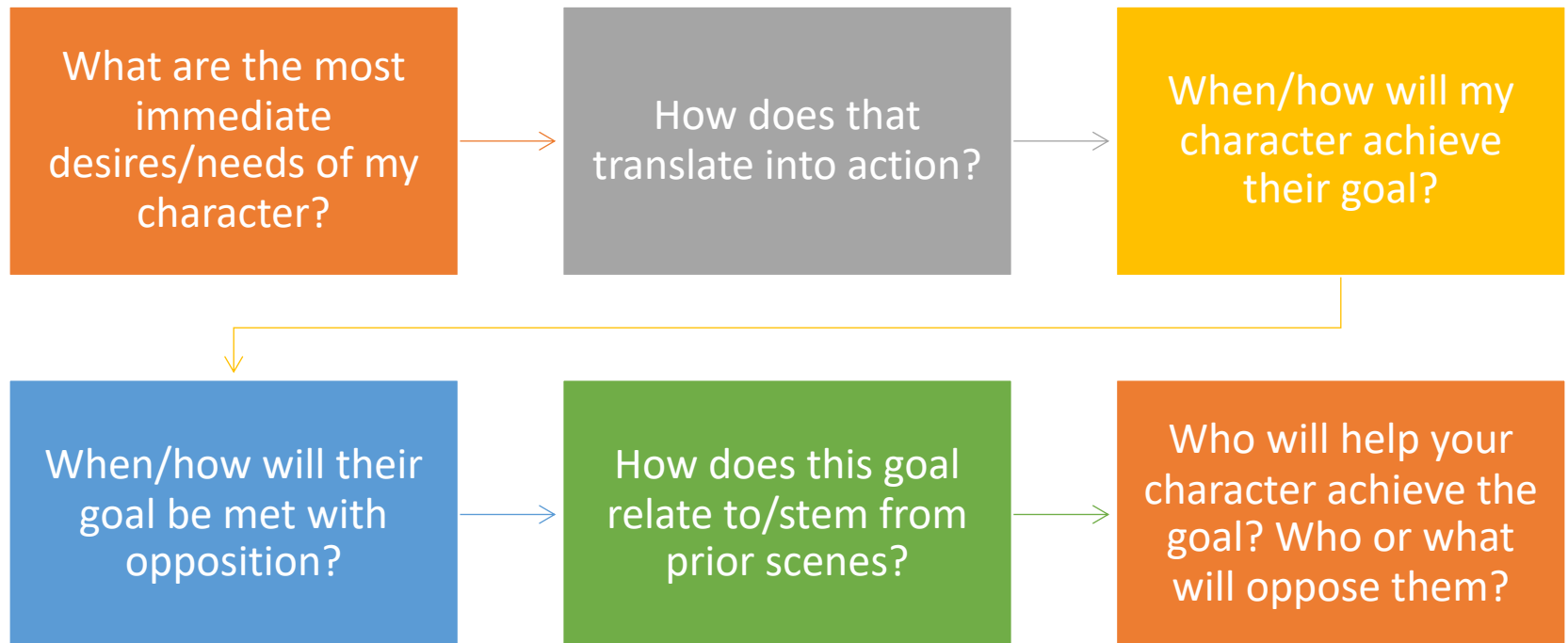


Two kinds of goals

Internal goals: These goals are more closely linked to a character's motivation, their backstory, their personality. They also come from choices the character makes willingly on their own.

External goals: These goals are often imposed upon the character by the antagonist or other circumstances; your character may not want to pursue this goal, but they have to (due to a potential consequence)

Goal Questions to Ask



Vanish, by
Tess
Gerritsen

This thriller launches its inciting incident when medical examiner Maura Isles prepares to do an autopsy on a “Jane Doe”an —unidentified female corpse. The dead woman opens her eyes. She’s not a zombie, she’s just barely alive.

Maura’s over-arching **plot goal** becomes: to figure out who this woman is and what happened to her.

Maura’s goals shift in every **scene**. As you’ll see:

Maura's Immediate Goal

- To interview Jane Doe and determine her identity. To discover what, if anything, she remembers about how she was left for dead.

Will she
achieve it or
be thwarted?

- Naturally, because Gerritsen understands tension, Maura's goal is thwarted.
- First, the hospital itself resists her wish to be allowed to speak to the woman.
- When she finally gets to speak with the woman, Jane Doe becomes violent and volatile, gets ahold of the guard's gun and shoots him, then takes Maura as her hostage.

New Scene Goal

Maura now has a new scene goal: to make it out of this woman's grasp alive. Though her original plot goal persists: to find out who she is, and what happened to her.

And, to keep tension alive, Gerritsen ends the scene with Maura in the grip of the deranged woman, leaving us to wonder what will happen next and to be compelled to turn the pages.

Build to a Dramatic Moment

We are not just complicating your character's scenes to be mean or torment them. You are pushing them toward an outcome related to their goal.



The high point of a scene is often called an epiphany. This is what the scene is building toward. The “a-ha” moment of discovery, understanding, revelation, or conflict.



When the reader has finished the scene they should be able to point to this moment and say “that is what I learned.”

Dramatic Moment Example

From How to Stop Time by Matt Haig, in which the main character ages so slowly he might as well be immortal. He's a 430 year old man working as a history teacher in a new job in contemporary London:

Then, suddenly, and with no warning, Camille falls off her chair. Her ribs hit the side of the table on her way down to the floor. Then her legs start to spasm violently. She is having some kind of fit, right there on the floor of the sports hall in the middle of parents' evening.

Tom rushes to her side, calls out orders and holds Camille steady. When her seizure ceases, she stares up at his face for a very long moment, and

Her eyes are fixed on me. "I do know you."

I smile at her, then, with more awkwardness, at Daphne. And I gently tell her, "Of course you do. We work together." I then, perhaps foolishly underline my point for the crowd. "The new history teacher."

She is leaning back. She sips the water. She shakes her head. "Ciro's."

The name hits my heart like a hammer. Hendrich's words, that day years ago in a hurricane-ravaged Central Park, come back to me. The past is never gone. It just hides.

Scene Endings

Eventually it's time to end your scenes.

Never tie a scene up too tidily—leave the reader wanting more.

Cliffhanger endings leave things completely unresolved

Some endings resolve the current scene goal but create a new goal or complication

Conclusive endings wrap everything up (use these sparingly)

Cliffhanger Ending

People were pushing and shoving, women screaming, babies crying. Caleb smelled gasoline. Men were hurling dining chairs through the windows. Others were upending tables to act as barricades. All the things of the world were colliding. Caleb took a position at the closest window, pointed his rifle into the darkness, and began to fire.

--The City of Mirrors, The Passage Series #3, Justin Cronin

Here, we leave the protagonist in imminent danger, and readers must turn pages to find out what happens next.

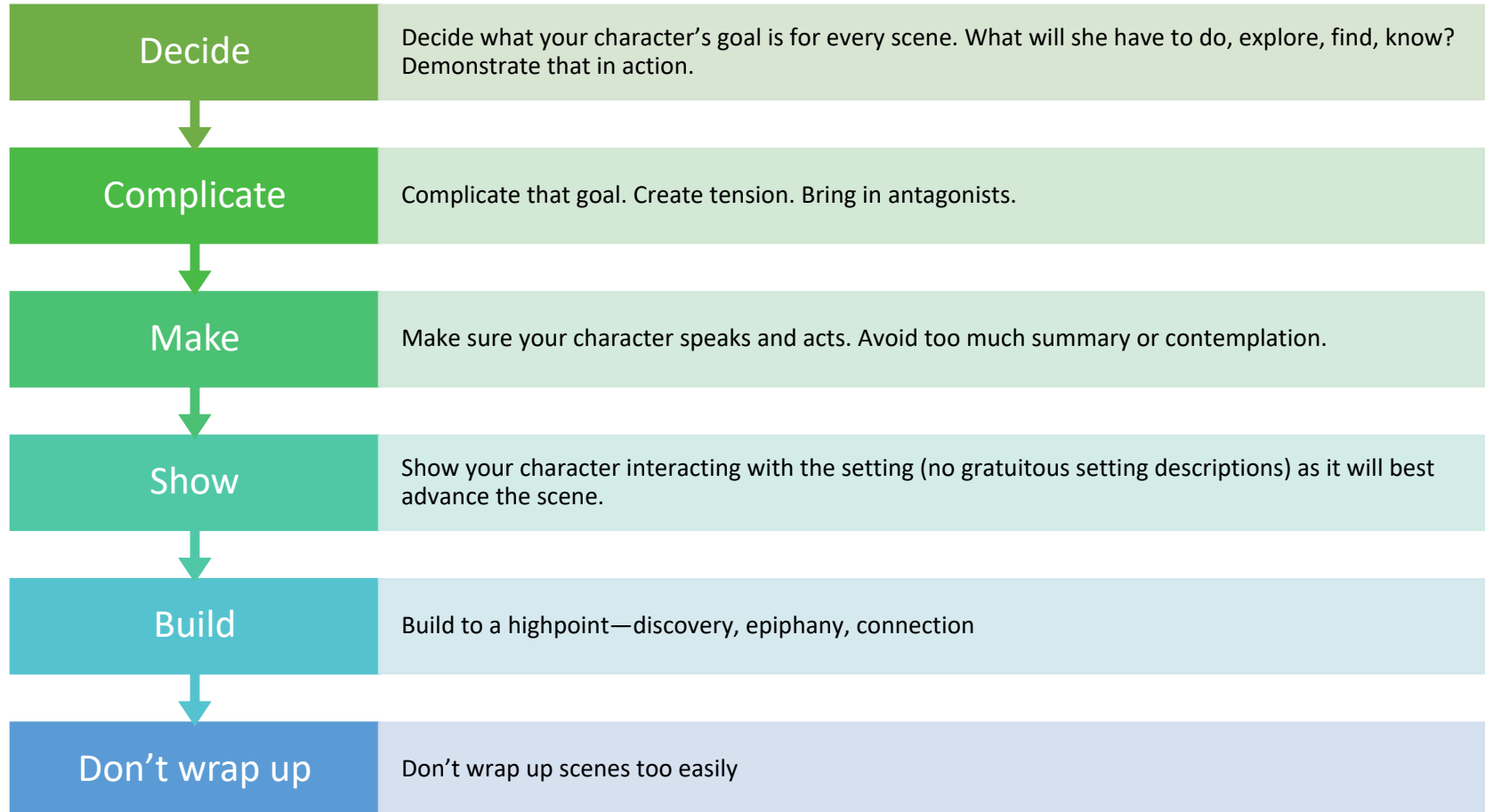
Reflective Ending

Since I'd met Suzanne, my life had come into sharp, mysterious relief, revealing a world beyond the known world, the hidden passage beyond the bookcase. I'd catch myself eating an apple, and even the wet swallow of apple could incite gratitude in me. The arrangement of oak leaves overhead condensing with a hothouse clarity, clues to a riddle I hadn't known you could try to solve.

--The Girls, Emma Cline

Though this ending is slower, calmer, it leaves us curious to know more.

Goals review



Scene Layers

Think of every scene as having three layers:

Action: Protagonist's goals and events that happen plus momentum/ moving through space and time.

Emotion: How the protagonist feels and reacts to what is happening. Use sensory imagery.

Theme: This is the deeper meaning of your story, conveyed in thematic imagery or dialogue.

Action

Action in scene: The momentum of people moving physically through space and time, engaging in dialogue, creating a sense of “real time” passing and touching on reader’s emotions.

“Noemi rounded a small cluster of tombs with moss covering the names and dates on them. Leaning back on a broken head stone, she reached into her pocket for her pack of cigarettes. She saw movement nearby, on a mound...” –**Mexican Gothic** by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Here, Noemi’s simple movements, walking through tombs, leaning back, reaching into her pocket convey the necessary sense of time passing that draws us in.

Action in Plot

Action in plot: This is the dramatic action that comprises the events of your plot:

Where your character pursues external goals

Faces off with antagonists

Reaps consequences.

Makes another discovery or turning point in the story

i.e. The protagonist or loved one is kidnapped; a boat they were supposed to get on explodes; A journalist breaks a story that changes your protagonist's life, etc.

Emotion in Scene

Emotion in Scene: Emotions are demonstrated through dialogue/actions and sensory images within every scene.

Avoid “telling” adjectives and adverbs and demonstrate character change in the scenes themselves.

“Something’s wrong. The thought hit Shana in the heart like a fist. Her guts went cold, her blood to slush. She couldn’t hold back the chills.”--Wanderers, by Chuck Wendig

Emotion in Plot

Emotion in Plot: As your character moves through the key turning points of the plot, known as “Energetic Markers,” she also moves through different emotional “stages.” Your plot is stagnant if your character’s emotional stage has not progressed.

Emotion is also generated in your reader when you’ve effectively demonstrated it in your character.

Energetic Markers

- The 4 Energetic Markers of Plot, drawn from my work with Martha Alderson (“The Plot Whisperer,” & “Writing Deep Scenes.”)
- **Energetic Marker 1. Beginning. At the 1/4 mark: POINT OF NO RETURN**
- Introduce the familiar world/characters, put character through a point of urgent change.
- **Energetic Marker 2. Emerging Middle. At the 1/2 mark: REDEDICATION**
- Protagonist enters the unknown, meets allies/antagonist, tests and challenges.
- **Energetic Marker 3. Deeper Middle. Around the 3/4 mark: DARK NIGHT**
- Scenes of highest intensity and challenge take place here. Action is high, stakes are high
- **Energetic Marker 4. End. With About ¼ left to go: TRIUMPH**
- Build to the most powerful climax scene. Protagonist and antagonist clash. Protagonist achieves a hard won victory with confidence and maturity, and action then falls.

Theme in Scene

You plant theme in your scenes in the form of imagery: visual descriptions, symbols, metaphor and similes that convey meaning.

Use a color motif

Objects may hold thematic significance

Thematic language, documents, photographs, etc

Theme in Plot

- If action is the clock of your plot, and emotion what touches reader's hearts, theme is the link that connects both elements and creates meaning.

"In the center of our house, there is a switch. It's like a light switch—on the wall in the hallway outside the kitchen. No one knows what the switch controls and no one wants to know."

- --*Switch*, A.S. King
- Here, playing with some magical realism/surrealism, the switch is a metaphor for the moment things went bad in their family.



In Summary

- A Scene is a unit of contained action that drives the story forward
- The hallmark of a scene is action, though you will want to include a balance of other scene ingredients
- Scenes “launch” and quickly you introduce your character’s goal
- You complicate that goal and build to a dramatic moment
- You end your scene not too tidily (cliffhanger or unresolved)
- Every scene has three layers: Action, Emotion & Theme and you want to work on balancing these three
- You transform a character over the course of a plot through key “energetic markets”—moments of change





My Next Classes

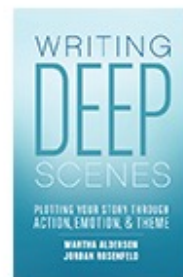
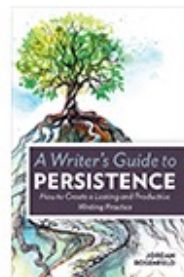
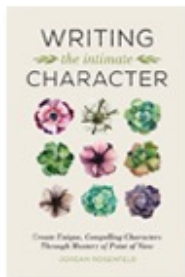
- I teach live, online classes via zoom. Cohorts of 12 maximum. Also self-paced.
- Each class consists of 30-45 mins of craft instruction plus writing prompts
- Each week 1-2 students receives group critique
- Goal setting & accountability
- Also, all of my classes can be taken self-paced. You receive access to videos + powerpoint presentations and one critique from me.

Live classes beginning in the New Year:

- **Fiction Frenzy:** A general craft class for fiction writers, January 20, Fridays at 4pm.
- **How to Write With Page Turning Tension,** January 26, Thursdays at 4pm.

Sign up at: www.jordanrosenfeld.net under the "Writing Classes" tab.

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