

## **The Two Levels of Scene Structure in Fiction**

A scene has two levels of structure:

The large-scale structure of the scene

The small-scale structure of the scene

I am going to steal insights from Dwight Swain's book, "Techniques of the Selling Writer." I will be giving you the high points in this article, but there is really no substitute for reading the book and digesting it.

Before we begin, we need to understand how we keep score. How do we know what perfection is? The answer is based on understanding your reader's motivation for reading.

Your reader is reading your work because you provide him or her with a powerful emotional experience. If you're writing a romance, you must create in your reader the illusion that she is falling in love herself. If you're writing a thriller, you must create in your reader the illusion that he is in mortal danger and has only the tiniest chance of saving his life (and all of humanity). If you're writing a fantasy, you must create in your reader the illusion that she is actually in another world where all is different and wonderful and magical. And so on for all the other genres.

### **Large-Scale Structure of a Scene**

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. In what follows, I'm going to capitalize these terms, calling them **Scenes** and **Sequels**. That is your signal that I'm using Swain's language. When I use the word "scene" in the ordinary non-Swain sense, I'll leave it uncapitalized. Since you are exceptionally brilliant and perceptive, you will not find this a problem. Let me give you the high points on **Scenes** and **Sequels** right up front.

A Scene has the following three-part pattern:

Goal

Conflict

Disaster

A Sequel has the following three-part pattern:

Reaction

Dilemma

Decision

**You may think these patterns** are too simple. You may think this is reducing writing to Paint-by-Numbers. Well, no. This is reducing

fiction to the two patterns that have been proven by thousands of novelists to actually work. There are plenty of other patterns people use. They typically work less well. It may well be that there are other patterns that work better. If you can find one that works better, please tell me. But for now, let's pretend that Dwight Swain is right. Let's pretend these are absolutely the best possible patterns for writing fiction. Let's pretend these are the keys to writing the perfect scene. Let's move on and look at each of these in turn.

As we said, the **Scene** has the three parts Goal, Conflict, and Disaster. Each of these is supremely important. I am going to define each of these pieces and then explain why each is critical to the structure of the **Scene**. I assume that you have selected one character to be your Point Of View character. In what follows, I'll refer to this character as your POV character. Your goal is to convincingly show your POV character experiencing the scene. You must do this so powerfully that your reader experiences the scene as if she were the POV character.

1. **Goal:** A Goal is what your POV character wants at the beginning of the Scene. The Goal must be specific and it must be clearly definable. The reason your POV character must have a Goal is that it makes your character proactive. Your character is not passively waiting for the universe to deal him Great Good. Your character is going after what he wants, just as your reader wishes he could do. It's a simple fact that any character who wants something desperately is an interesting character. Even if he's not nice, he's interesting. And your reader will identify with him. That's what you want as a writer.
2. **Conflict:** Conflict is the series of obstacles your POV character faces on the way to reaching his Goal. You must have Conflict in your **Scene!** If your POV character reaches his Goal with no Conflict, then the reader is bored. Your reader wants to struggle! No victory has any value if it comes too easy. So make your POV character struggle and your reader will live out that struggle too.
3. **Disaster:** A Disaster is a failure to let your POV character reach his Goal. Don't give him the Goal! Winning is boring! When a **Scene** ends in victory, your reader feels no reason to turn the page. If things are going well, your reader might as well go to bed. No! Make something awful happen. Hang your POV character off a cliff and your reader will turn the page to see what happens next.

That's all! There is literally nothing more you need to know about **Scenes**. Now let's look at **Sequels** . . .

The **Sequel** has the three parts Reaction, Dilemma, and Decision. Again, each of these is critical to a successful **Sequel**. Remove any of them and the **Sequel** fails to work. Let me add one important point here. The purpose of a **Sequel** is to follow after a **Scene**. A **Scene** ends on a Disaster, and you can't immediately follow that up with a new **Scene**, which begins with a Goal. Why? Because when you've just been slugged with a serious setback, you can't just rush out and try something new. You've got to recover. That's basic psychology.

1. **Reaction:** A Reaction is the emotional follow-through to a Disaster. When something awful happens, you're staggering for awhile, off-balance, out of kilter. You can't help it. So show your POV character reacting viscerally to his Disaster. Show him hurting. Give your reader a chance to hurt with your characters. You may need to show some passage of time. This is not a time for action, it's a time for re-action. A time to weep. But you can't stagger around in pain forever. In real life, if people do that they lose their friends. In fiction, if you do it, you lose your readers. Eventually, your POV character needs to get a grip. To take stock. To look for options. And the problem is that there aren't any .  
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2. **Dilemma:** A Dilemma is a situation with no good options. If your Disaster was a real Disaster, there aren't any good choices. Your POV character must have a real dilemma. This gives your reader a chance to worry, which is good. Your reader must be wondering what can possibly happen next. Let your POV character work through the choices. Let him sort things out. Eventually, let him come to the least-bad option .  
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3. **Decision:** A Decision is the act of making a choice among several options. This is important, because it lets your POV character become proactive again. People who never make decisions are boring people. They wait around for somebody else to decide. And nobody wants to read about somebody like that. So make your character decide, and make it a good decision. Make it one your reader can respect. Make it risky, but make it have a chance of working. Do that, and your reader will have to turn the page, because now your POV character has a new Goal.

**And now you've come full circle.** You've gone from **Scene** to **Sequel** and back to the Goal for a new **Scene**. This is why the **Scene-Sequel** pattern is so powerful. A **Scene** leads naturally to a **Sequel**, which leads naturally to a new **Scene**. And so on forever. At some point, you'll end the cycle. You'll give your POV character either Ultimate Victory or Ultimate Defeat and that will be the end of the book. But until you get there, the

alternating pattern of **Scene** and **Sequel** will carry you through. And your reader will curse you when he discovers that he's spent the whole doggone night reading your book because he could not put the thing down.

That's perfection.

**However, it's only half the battle.** I've told you how to design the **Scenes** and **Sequels** in the large scale. But you still need to write them. You need to write paragraph after compelling paragraph, with each one leading your POV character smoothly through from initial Goal to knuckle-whitening Conflict to bone-jarring Disaster, and then through a visceral Reaction to a horrible Dilemma and finally on to a clever Decision.

How do you do that? How do you execute those paragraphs? How do you do it perfectly?

### **Small-Scale Structure of a Scene**

**The answer is to use** what Dwight Swain calls "Motivation-Reaction Units." He calls them MRUs for short. This is such an absurdly ridiculous term that I'm going to keep it, just to prove that Mr. Swain was not perfect. Writing MRUs is hard. However, I've found that it provides the most bang for the buck in improving your writing. I've mentored many writers, and a universal problem for them was the failure to write MRUs correctly. My solution was to make them painfully work through several chapters so that each one was nothing more nor less than a string of perfect MRUs. After a few chapters, the technique gets easier. Then I maliciously require them to rewrite their whole novel this way. This is brutally hard work, but those who have survived it have become much better writers.

**Writing MRUs correctly is the magic key** to compelling fiction. I don't care if you believe me or not. Try it and see.

I hope you are salivating to learn this magical tool. You need to first suffer through one full paragraph of theory. I know you will do this because you are intelligent and patient and because I am flattering you quite thickly.

You will write your MRUs by alternating between what your POV character sees (the Motivation) and what he does (the Reaction). This is supremely important. Remember that Swain calls these things "Motivation-Reaction Units". The Motivation is objective but it is something that your character can see (or hear or smell or taste or feel). You will write this in such a way that your reader also sees it (or hears it or smells it or tastes it or

feels it). You will then start a new paragraph in which your POV character does one or more things in Reaction to the Motivation. There is an exact sequence you must follow in writing your Reaction. The sequence is based on what is physiologically possible. Note that the Motivation is external and objective. The Reaction is internal and subjective. If you do this, you create in your reader the powerful illusion that he is experiencing something real. Now let's break this down into more detail . . .

**The Motivation is external and objective**, and you present it that way, in objective, external terms. You do this in a single paragraph. It does not need to be complicated.

Here is a simple example:

The tiger dropped out of the tree and sprang toward Jack.

Note the key points here. This is objective. We present the Motivation as it would be shown by a videocamera. Nothing here indicates that we are in Jack's point of view. That comes next, but in the Motivation we keep it simple and sharp and clean.

**The Reaction is internal and subjective**, and you present it that way, exactly as your POV character would experience it – from the inside. This is your chance to make your reader be your POV character. To repeat myself, this must happen in its own paragraph (or sequence of paragraphs). If you leave it in the same paragraph as the Motivation, then you risk whip-sawing the reader. Which no reader enjoys.

The Reaction is more complex than the Motivation. The reason is that it is internal, and internal processes happen on different time-scales. When you see a tiger, in the first milliseconds, you only have time for one thing – fear. Within a few tenths of a second, you have time to react on instinct, but that is all it will be – instinct, reflex. But shortly after that first reflexive reaction, you will also have time to react rationally, to act, to think, to speak. You must present the full complex of your character's reactions in this order, from fastest time-scale to slowest. If you put them out of order, then things just don't feel right. You destroy the illusion of reality. And your reader won't keep reading because your writing is "not realistic." Even if you got all your facts right.

Here is a simple example:

A bolt of raw adrenaline shot through Jack's veins. He jerked his rifle to his shoulder, sighted on the tiger's heart, and squeezed the trigger. "Die, you bastard!"

**Now let's analyze this.** Note the three parts of the Reaction:

1. **Feeling:** "A bolt of raw adrenaline shot through Jack's veins." You show this first, because it happens almost instantly.
2. **Reflex:** "He jerked his rifle to his shoulder . . ." You show this second, as a result of the fear. An instinctive result that requires no conscious thought.
3. **Rational Action and Speech:** ". . . sighted on the tiger's heart, and squeezed the trigger. 'Die, you bastard!'" You put this last, when Jack has had time to think and act in a rational way. He pulls the trigger, a rational response to the danger. He speaks, a rational expression of his intense emotional reaction.

It is legitimate to leave out one or two of these three parts. (You can't leave out all three or you have no Reaction.) But there is one critical rule to follow in leaving parts out: Whatever parts you keep in must be in the correct order. If there is a Feeling, it must come first. If there is a Reflex, it must never come before a Feeling. If there is some Rational Action, it must always come last. This is simple and obvious and if you follow this rule, your Reactions will be perfectly structured time after time.

**And after the Reaction** comes . . . another Motivation. This is the key. You can't afford to write one perfect MRU and then be happy. You've got to write another and another and another. The Reaction you just wrote will lead to some new Motivation that is again external and objective and which you will write in its own paragraph. Just to continue the example we've created so far:

The bullet grazed the tiger's left shoulder. Blood squirted out of the jagged wound. The tiger roared and staggered, then leaped in the air straight at Jack's throat.

Note that the Motivation can be complex or it can be simple. The only requirement is that it be external and objective, something that not only Jack can see and hear and feel but which any other observer could also see and hear and feel, if they were there.

The important thing is to keep the alternating pattern. You write a Motivation and then a Reaction and then another Motivation and then another Reaction. When you run out of Motivations or Reactions, your **Scene** or **Sequel** is over. Don't run out too soon. Don't drag on too long.

**Write each Scene and Sequel** as a sequence of MRUs. Any part of your **Scene** or **Sequel** which is not an MRU must go. Cut it

ruthlessly. Show no mercy. You can not afford charity for a single sentence that is not pulling its weight. And the only parts of your scene that pull their weight are the MRUs. All else is fluff.

### **About Those Pesky Rules**

**You may be feeling** that it's impossible to write your scenes following these rules. Doing so causes you to freeze. You stare blindly at the computer screen, afraid to move a muscle for fear of breaking a Rule. Oh dear, you've got yourself a case of writer's block. That's bad. Now let me tell you the final secret for writing the perfect scene.

**Forget all these rules.** That's right, ignore the varmints. Just write your chapter in your usual way, putting down any old words you want, in any old way you feel like. There, that feels better, doesn't it? You are creating, and that's good. Creation is constructing a story from nothing. It's hard work, it's fun, it's exciting, it's unstructured. It's imperfect. Do it without regard for the rules.

When you have finished creating, set it aside for awhile. You will later need to edit it, but now is not the time. Do something else. Write another scene. Go bowling. Spend time with those annoying people who live in your house. Remember them? Your family and friends? Do something that is Not Writing.

Later on, when you are ready, come back and read your Great Piece of Writing. It will have many nice points to it, but it will not be perfectly structured. Now you are ready to edit it and impose perfect structure on it. This is a different process than Creation. This is Analysis, and it is the opposite of Creation. Analysis is destruction. You must now take it apart and put it back together.

**Analyze the scene** you have written. Is it a **Scene** or a **Sequel**? Or neither? If it is neither, then you must find a way to make it one or the other or you must throw it away. If it is a **Scene**, verify that it has a Goal, a Conflict, and a Disaster. Identify them each in a one-sentence summary. Likewise, if it's a **Sequel**, verify that it has a Reaction, a Dilemma, and a Decision. Identify each of these in a one-sentence summary. If you can't put the scene into one of these two structures, then throw the scene away as the worthless piece of drivel that it is. You may someday find a use for it as a sonnet or a limerick or a technical manual, but it is not fiction and there is no way to make it fiction, so get rid of it.

**Now that you know** what your scene is, either **Scene** or **Sequel**, rewrite it MRU by MRU. Make sure every Motivation is separated from every Reaction by a paragraph break. It is okay to have multiple paragraphs for a single Motivation or a single Reaction. It is a capital crime to mix them in a single paragraph. When they are separated correctly, you may find you have extra parts that are neither Motivation nor Reaction. Throw them away, no matter how beautiful or clever they are. They are not fiction and you are writing fiction.

Examine each Motivation and make sure that it is entirely objective and external. Show no mercy. You can not afford mercy on anything that poisons your fiction. Kill it or it will kill you.

Now identify the elements of each Reaction and make sure they are as subjective and internal as possible. Present them as nearly as you can from inside the skin of your POV character. Make sure they are in the correct order, with Feelings first, then Reflexive Actions, and finally Rational Actions and Speech. Again, eliminate everything else, even brilliant insights that would surely get you a Nobel peace prize. Brilliant insights are very fine, but if they aren't fiction, they don't belong in your fiction. If you can contrive to rearrange such a thing to be in a correct fictional pattern, then fine. Keep it. Otherwise, slit its vile throat and throw the carcass to the wolves. You are a novelist, and that's what novelists do.

**When you reach the end** of the scene, whether it is a **Scene** or a **Sequel**, check to make sure that everything is correctly placed in an MRU and all carcasses are thrown out. Feel free to edit the scene for style, clarity, wit, spelling, grammar, and any other thing you know how to do. When you are done, pat yourself on the back.

You have written a perfect scene. All is well in your world. You are done with this scene.

Now go do it again and again until you finish your book.