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Bridget's Quick and Dirty Scene Work Tips

Why Put Story Moments "In Scene?"

Think about the last time a friend told you a story that had you on the edge of your seat.

Chances are, it went something like this:

So, there I was, standing on the edge of this thirty-foot high vertical piece of sandstone, looking down at the waves pounding the cliff below me. I can barely breathe, and my heart is pounding in my throat, but my boyfriend is behind me screaming, "Jump, jump!" So, I took a deep breath...

or this:

You'll never believe this: I was sitting at the table in this nice fancy locavore place, drinking some Chardonnay and eating homemade pickles when Sarah stomped across the room, stopped right by my chair, put her hands on her hips, and growled, "You lying piece of garbage!" So, I got up...

This is how we humans tell stories. We tell them in scenes. We put the listener (or, in our case, the reader) in our shoes so that they can relive experiences with us.

This has two important effects:

1. It makes the story more compelling; we get to live it!
2. It eliminates the need for us to "tell" how we felt in the moment. By recapturing the scene (or "showing" it, as we often say), the listener or reader will actually HAVE the feeling on their own, in their own body.

Make Your Writing Like a Movie

I like to use the movie comparison.

Rarely does a narrator stand in front of the screen and say, "Here's what I am thinking, and here's what I learned"—even when it's a documentary. Instead, good movies are made up of scene after scene where people interact with real dialogue in real places doing real things. No one explains what the scenes mean. The scenes do the talking, and you are left to interpret them.

Books are no different. Good fiction, good memoir, and even compelling nonfiction strings together scenes. Yes, some explaining (or "backstory," as it's generally called) usually needs to happen in between those scenes. But, by and large, authors tell stories with action and detail so the reader can experience them on their own—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Let's Look at an Example...

Here's a first draft chunk of essay text I wrote about getting stung by a sting ray:

Towards the end of one particularly long ride, I stepped a little too far forward on my surfboard and slipped into the water. As my foot hit the sand, I remember feeling a paralyzing fear.

This is classic first draft material here. I was just trying to get the skeleton of the story out on the page, and I did that successfully. But, reading back through it, it's obvious that there's a lot of room for improvement—most of which will naturally come about by putting this moment "in scene." For starters, if I put the reader on the board and help them experience riding a wave, they get to have a new experience. If they can feel what it's like to ride a wave, then they can feel what it's like to slip. Let's start there:

After I stood up on my board and pressed down on my back heel, I felt the fin lock into the wave's momentum. I was up and in balance. I exhaled, bent my knees slightly, and looked to the right, down the dark turquoise face of the curling wave. I could hang ten on this one, I thought. I raised my arms, and, in a move like a salsa dancer's, brought my back foot forward and placed it ahead of my front foot, down along the center stripe. The board accelerated, and my whole body smiled. I'd just begun another cross-step when I suddenly lurched forward, slid across the board, and flew into the water. Instinctively, my foot shot down towards the sand.

That's better. It may be a little overdone now, but I can deal with that later, when I see how this scene fits into the overall essay.

Next, I've got a classic "telling" statement in my original version that needs to go: "I remember feeling a paralyzing fear."

There are two problems with this sentence. The first is "I remember." This phrase generally takes the reader *out* of a scene by reminding them that they're listening to someone's memory of the story rather than living the story directly. That effect is the opposite of the one you're trying to cultivate! And, it's obvious; if you're using past tense, you're describing something you remember. Most of the time, this phrase should be cut.

In addition, the sentence *tells* us that the narrator felt fear. Why not allow the reader to feel the fear for themselves? Here's the idea:

As my toes touched down, the surface beneath them fluttered. My stomach, too, fluttered—then it contracted into a hard ball. Nausea rippled through me as I realized I'd stepped on a solid layer of sting ray flesh.

If you can communicate an emotion (in this case, fear) without using the word for that emotion, chances are you're on the right track.

Use Dialogue!

Because the narrator is the only person in the scene above, there's no actual dialogue. However, notice that I did add a line of internal dialogue: *I could hang ten on this one, I thought.* That can be just as effective.

Dialogue is, hands down, one of the best ways to put a reader "in scene." And, in fiction writing, you can use as much of it as you want, so go for it! In narrative non-fiction, if you have transcripts of the material you are quoting, you can use it just as liberally.

In memoir, however, you have to be more careful. Readers will not believe that you can rattle off five lines of dialogue from a conversation that took place ten years ago. They'll doubt your reliability in the telling of this scene, which can contribute to your loss of authority throughout the text. The easiest way around this is to combine direct dialogue with paraphrases, like this:

"Don't we have any painkillers?" I cried.

Paolo went to the truck and rifled around in the back seat. "Tequila?"

"Give it to me!"

After he watched me down a double shot in one swig, he mentioned that he'd run into friends earlier in the day who were camped a little way down the beach. "I'm going to head over there and see if they have anything, okay? I'll be back as fast as I can." He returned with a little orange bottle.

There are three lines of dialogue right off the bat, but they are short enough that a reader can believe I'd remember them. Then, I took the next line of what could have been a quote ("So I ran into Dave and his wife who are camped down the beach earlier today—maybe they have something?") out of dialogue and put it in paraphrase. Why this line? Because it's long, factual, and not that interesting—although it is important background information that has to be there. Unlike the lines, "Don't we have any painkillers?" and "Give it to me!" it communicates no emotion.

When in doubt, keep emotion in dialogue and take factual material out.

For more ideas about using dialogue, take a look at my Dialogue Tips sheet.

So, How Do You Know When to Use a Scene?

Simple answer: when your reading buddy or editor tells you to!

I'm joking here—but only partly. Skilled outside readers are often the best barometers for scene use. They know when you're telling and not showing, and they can almost always point out where a scene would be especially effective.

Typically, scenes are most needed in the following conditions:

- *Critical plot moments.* When something big happens, let readers see it unfold.
- *Critical character development moments.* If a character experiences a mindset shift, show that in scene.
- *Highly emotional moments.* Rarely do you want readers to experience breakups and hookups in "telling" language!
- *Unique moments.* If you think the reader's life will be enriched by "living" an event through your writing (e.g., they get to feel what it's like to surf even if they never get on a board), consider putting it in scene.

Can You Overdo Scenes?

Sure. But in my editing experience, it's rare. Almost everything I read in early-draft form could benefit from more scenes.

Sometimes, experiences haven't been fully processed by the author. The scenes are there, but the reader isn't sure what the narrator or author made of them. In this case, instead of cutting scenes, what's usually needed is more reflection that works through those scenes, not fewer scenes.

When in doubt, write it out. Put it in scene, and run it by a good reader!