

DEFINING SCENES AND SEQUELS

by Mike Klaassen

You may be calling scene and sequel by different names, such as proactive scene and reactive scene. What are the correct names for what I refer to as scenes and sequels? And does it really matter? As writers we take pride in finding the right word for each situation, so it's pretty hard to argue that the labels we use are not important. But that isn't the most important reason to correctly label scenes and sequels. Failure to adequately name something can reflect a lack of understanding (whales, at one time, were classified as fish). Understanding something isn't just an academic exercise. Understanding a writing technique improves our ability to use that tool to its full potential, in writing and in teaching.

Let's explore scenes first. The term *scene* is one of many in the English language that takes on different meaning in different contexts. A *scene* can represent a place where an event occurred, as in *scene of the crime*. A *scene* can represent an exhibition of passionate or explosive emotion, as in *making a scene*. In dramatic presentations (such as in theater, movies, and television), *scene* can mean the stage itself or the surroundings amid which drama is presented; or a *scene* can mean a sequence of events within the presentation.¹

How-to books about writing fiction range widely in their coverage of the subject of scenes. Some don't use the term *scene* at all. Others promote the concept of writing scenes without attempting to define *scene*, or they define the term with vague, rambling expressions.

When I started studying the craft of writing fiction, I was first exposed to the concept of scenes by Jack M. Bickham (1930-1997) in *Scene and Structure* (1993). Bickham gives much credit to his teacher and friend Dwight V. Swain (1915-1992), who wrote *Techniques of a Selling Writer* (1965).

Often we can learn more about a subject if we can properly define it. Swain defined a scene as "a unit of conflict lived through by character and reader."ⁱⁱ Bickham apparently recognized a need to expand on Swain's definition because he described a *scene* as "a segment of story action, written moment-by-moment, without summary, presented onstage in the story 'now.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

Each of these definitions has merit, but they lack the clarity and conciseness needed to be useful tools. Let's get basic, here. What are we referring to? Swain refers to a scene as a "unit," but he doesn't say unit of what. Bickham describes scenes as a "segment of story action."

Swain and Bickham were pioneers in the study of scenes and sequels. We owe them much, but that doesn't mean their work can't be improved. Both were teachers, and I suspect they would be pleased to have their concepts refined and expanded.

To fully understand scenes, we need to look at the bigger picture of where they fit as structural units in written fiction. Words form phrases and sentences. Sentences comprise paragraphs. Two or more paragraphs with some common purpose are referred to as *passages* or *segments* of writing. Scenes could easily include two or more paragraphs, so it's fair to define them as either passages or segments. Let's start our definition of scenes with the phrase "A passage of writing that . . ."

Now let's address the "that" in the above definition. What's the *that* in a scene? The Swain and Bickham definitions of a scene include references to conflict, character, reader, story, action, moment-by-moment, on stage, and the "story now." *Scenes* are sometimes referred to as units of drama, so I would add tension and suspense to the list. Rather than a concise definition, these terms seem to be more of a description of what an ideal scene should include.

To be helpful in troubleshooting our own writing, we need a definition that boils a scene down to its essence. Swain's "unit of conflict" seems to come pretty close, but *conflict* is a compound concept that includes a character attempting to achieve a goal and encountering resistance that puts accomplishment of that goal in doubt. Resistance without a character and a goal would be meaningless. The pure essence of a scene focuses on its lowest common denominator: a character attempting to achieve a goal. With that in mind, I define a *scene* as a passage of writing in which a character attempts to achieve a goal.

Now let's look at sequels. The Latin origin of the word *sequel* means *to follow*. *Sequel* can refer to people who follow, such as retainers. A *sequel* can mean next in an unfolding series, such as *Jaws III*. *Sequel* can also mean something that follows from an antecedent cause.^{iv}

Other than the two by Swain and Bickham, few how-to books mention sequels. If they refer to the concept at all, they use terms like contemplative scenes, transition scenes, reaction scenes, reaction sections, scene setups, reflective passages, or aftermaths.

Swain defined a *sequel* as "a unit of transition that links two scenes."^v Bickham described *transition* as "a very simple device which provides a direct statement to the reader to the effect that a change in time, place or viewpoint has happened since the last scene."^{vi}

Bickham continues, "Such simple transitions sometimes are enough to serve as the bridge to carry your reader from one scene to another. But clearly, if you want to deal in any depth with a character's emotional state, or show his thought processes as he analyzes his plight and makes future plans, or use his thinking process to give the reader information about things that happened before the story started (or in the time that lapsed between chapters), then you need something bigger and better than a simple transition. . . That "something"—the sequel—is the glue that holds scenes together and helps you get from one to the next."^{vii}

I cringe at Bickham's reference to transitions as "a very simple device." My book *Fiction-Writing Modes* identifies transitions as one of the eleven modes and devotes a full chapter to the subject. Admittedly, many writers of how-to books downplay the importance of transitions. Bickham does do us a big favor by noting the relationship between the subjects of discussion: *scene—transition—sequel*. In this article, we'll leave the discussion of transitions at that.

Let's define a sequel. If a scene is a passage of writing, so is a sequel, so let's start our definition of *sequel* as "a passage of writing . . ." But what is the *that* in a sequel? Bickham describes a sequel as having three phases: emotion, thinking, and decision. That encompasses a lot, so let's boil it down even more. Clearly, a *sequel* is a reaction to the ending of a scene, so my definition includes the phrase ". . . in which the

character reacts to the resolution of a scene." But this definition would seem to include a physical reaction, and if a passage is about a character's physical reaction, then it is probably a scene rather than a sequel. While a sequel may include incidental activity, a sequel is mostly in the character's mind, so I've added the word *reflects* to the definition. I define a *sequel* as a passage of fiction in which a character reflects on the resolution of a scene.

Swain and Bickham both used the terms *scene* and *sequel*, and they wrote comprehensively on these subjects, more so than anyone else I've read. Sometimes in recent years, the terms *scene* and *sequel* have been at least partially replaced with the terms *proactive scene* and *reflective scene*. As writers we value the preciseness of words, so why is it better to replace the single term *scene* with the phrase *proactive scene*, using two words? Why is it better to replace the single term *sequel* with the phrase *reactive scene*?—especially without defining *scene* first.

I believe the use of the terms *proactive scene* and *reactive scene* reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept of scenes in the structure of fiction writing. The use of *proactive* and *reactive* as modifiers implies that they are subsets of a larger category called *scene*. If so, how is that term defined? How would the term incorporate passages that include elements of both proactive and reactive scenes and passages that are neither proactive nor reactive scenes? Difficult isn't it? I suspect that's why the proponents of the terms *proactive* and *reactive* don't bother to define *scene*.

As I mentioned earlier, this discussion is not merely academic because our goal is to develop a useful technique for writing and teaching. A helpful tool for understanding fiction would be to have a comprehensive model of how fiction writing

works. The definitions I have presented for scenes and sequels fit into a useful model of how fiction works.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Scenes and Sequels: How to Write Page-Turning Fiction*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may "Look Inside" the eBook edition at Amazon.com.

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ⁱ Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary, scene.

ⁱⁱ Swain, *Techniques of a Selling Writer*, 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bickham, *Scene & Structure*, 23.

^{iv} Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary, sequel.

^v Swain, *Techniques of a Selling Writer*, 84.

^{vi} Bickham, *Scene & Structure*, 50.

^{vii} Bickham, *Scene & Structure*, 50-51.