

FOUR TYPES OF PASSAGES IN WRITTEN FICTION

by Mike Klaassen

In the real world of fiction, from a rough draft to a published novel, passages of writing may be classified into four groups: (1) scenes, (2) sequels, (3) passages that are *neither* scenes nor sequels, and (4) passages that include elements of *both* scenes and sequels.

NEITHER SCENES NOR SEQUELS

I define a *scene* as a passage of writing in which a character attempts to achieve a goal. A *sequel* is a passage of writing in which a character has a reflective response to the resolution of a scene. Passages that are neither scenes nor sequels may be divided into four groups based upon their most prominent fiction-writing mode:

1. Passages of interiority: recollection, introspection, sensation, emotion
2. Passages of exteriority: description, exposition, narration, and transition

3. Passages of conversation: dialogue or monologue
4. Passages of activity: action and summarization

PASSAGES OF INTERIORITY

Passages of introspection, sensation, emotion, or recollection in which the character is neither attempting to achieve a goal nor reacting reflectively to what happened to him in a previous scene are neither sequels nor scenes. Such passages may serve a need perceived by the author, or they may have little value at all. In such passages, nothing seems to happen, because, well, nothing much *is* happening. A classic example is the entire first chapter Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.¹

PASSAGES OF EXTERIORITY

Passages narrated directly to the reader (exteriority) with no attempt to disguise the words as being filtered through the consciousness of a viewpoint character were common in most of the novels I studied. Usually, the narrative combined with other fiction-writing modes to create a passage of narrative-description, narrative-exposition, or narrative-transition. Such passages are frequently found near the beginning of a chapter as a way to set up a scene. Examples of narrative-summary appear in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*.² An example of narrative-exposition may be found on the first page of John Grisham's *The Client*.³ In addition to narration, these passages frequently include description, exposition, transition, and summarization, as did Michael Crichton in *Jurassic Park*.⁴

PASSAGES OF CONVERSATION

Passages of dialogue or monologue in which the character is not attempting to achieve a goal nor reacting reflectively to a scene are neither sequels nor scenes. An extreme example is Chapter XL of *Moby-Dick*, where Melville portrays the crew of the *Pequod* on deck singing and talking.⁵

PASSAGES OF ACTIVITY

Passages of action or summarization in which the character is not attempting to achieve a goal nor reacting reflectively to a scene are neither sequels nor scenes. Chapter II of *Charlotte's Web*, by E. B. White, includes lots of activity, but much of it is neither a scene nor a sequel.⁶

Passages that are neither scenes nor sequels are easy to identify. They're usually the parts of a book you're tempted to skip.

BOTH SCENES AND SEQUELS

Passages that include elements of both scenes and sequels may be divided into two types: (1) passages with an unclear purpose, and (2) problem-solving passages.

PASSAGES WITH UNCLEAR PURPOSE

As I analyzed each of the novels selected, I noted in the margins whether the passage was a scene, a sequel, or something else. Many of the passages were clearly scenes or sequels, but quite a few included elements of both scenes and sequels. The novels I

studied are examples of highly successful fiction, so I wasn't surprised to find few passages with unclear purpose. Chapters XXIX and XXX of *Moby-Dick* include elements of both scenes and sequels, but if Melville had deleted both, I wouldn't have missed them.⁷

Speaking from personal experience, I'd say that passages with elements of both scenes and sequels and no clear purpose most commonly appear in early drafts of a manuscript. One of my goals in self-editing—and I hope in yours, too—is to rewrite such passages or delete them.

PROBLEM-SOLVING PASSAGES

An example of a problem-solving passage can be found in *Hatchet*, where young Brian tries to figure out what he can eat in the wilderness.⁸ The passage that begins with Brian's determination to find some food includes a clear goal (an element of scene) but no plan to achieve it (assessment of his situation, an element of a sequel). He digresses into recollection of a Thanksgiving meal at home, which only makes his saliva flow and his stomach growl (the emotion of frustration, which is an element of both scenes and sequels). He considers options (an element of the analysis phase of a sequel), such as finding lizards, but selects berries as his optimal choice. Brian plans a course of action that he hopes will let him find berries without getting lost before dark (planning is an element of the analysis phase of sequels). He makes a decision (which is the final phase of a sequel).

The passage described above could be classified as a sequel (with the elements of emotion, review, analysis, planning, and decision), or it could be classified as a scene (with a goal, multiple attempts, and a resolution).

Problem-solving passages are particularly useful in mystery stories. For example, Dan Brown uses problem-solving passages extensively in *The Da Vinci Code*.⁹ They are also common in *The General's Daughter* by Nelson DeMille,¹⁰ and in *Without Fail*, by Lee Child.¹¹

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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¹ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 27-32.

² Paulsen, *Hatchet*, 100-103.

³ Grisham, *The Client*, 1-2.

⁴ Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, 145-147.

⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 213-219.

⁶ White, *Charlotte's Web*, 8-12.

⁷ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 161-165.

⁸ Paulsen, *Hatchet*, 57-61.

⁹ Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 68-70, 91-98, and 157-161.

¹⁰ DeMille, *The General's Daughter*, 29-33, 54-65, 78-79.

¹¹ Child, *Without Fail*, 460-473.