

PROTOTYPE SEQUEL

By Mike Klaassen

To show how to write a sequel in fiction, let's look at a *prototype sequel*, an ideal, fully developed model. A *sequel* is a passage of writing in which the character reflects on the outcome of a scene. Like a scene, a sequel mimics real life. When something important happens, we tend to respond first with emotion. After our emotions settle down, we try to make sense of our circumstances, reviewing recent events, evaluating how the new situation affects us, formulating alternative courses of action, and planning our next move. After forming a judgment, we make a decision about what to do next. Let's look at the components of a prototype sequel.

SETUP

Like a scene, a sequel may need a setup to establish time, place, viewpoint character, and situation. A setup may be long, or it may be as short as a line or two. Often, though, a sequel immediately follows the scene that preceded it, so it needs no setup.

CHARACTER

A scene focuses on the character's attempting to achieve a goal. The subsequent sequel often features that same focal character but not always. For example, a scene in *Moby-Dick* shows Captain Ahab nailing a gold coin to the ship's mast as he rallies his crew to help him find the great white whale. The following sequel features Ishmael (the viewpoint character) wondering what he has signed on for. A novel with two viewpoint

characters (such as a romance) may alternate characters for scenes and sequels. Novels with multiple viewpoint characters have even more flexibility for making a switch.

EMOTION

The resolution of a scene determines the character's subsequent emotional state. A scene may end with the character's achieving his short-term goal. A scene may end with failure or something even worse, as when the character ends up further from his objective than when he started. Also, a scene may end with some combination of success and failure—partial success. The character's emotional reaction may therefore range anywhere from euphoria to devastation.

A character's emotional reaction to events often signals the beginning of a new sequel. In fiction as in life, the reaction to an event may include multiple emotions, possibly a chaotic mixture of feelings. The intensity of emotional reaction may range from almost nothing to such an overload that it causes mental paralysis. Our goal as fiction writers is to generate emotion in our readers, so we want scene endings to be significant, often dramatic enough to immobilize our character with emotion, possibly chaotic emotions that force the character to grapple with his feelings.

THOUGHT

At some point after a significant event, our emotions subside, and we begin to think intelligently. As stated by Jack M. Bickham in *Scene & Structure* (1993), "At first this thought may be somewhat haphazard and confused by emotion . . .," but sooner or later the character begins to think rationally. Bickham identified three phases in the thought process of sequels: (1) review, (2) analysis, and (3) planning.ⁱ

REVIEW

The character looks back on the scene and remembers the outcome. For example, after Jack steals a bag of gold and escapes from an ogre, he may replay the scene in his mind as he mentally celebrates his bravery and good fortune. The review phase is likely to employ the fiction-writing mode of recollection. Occasionally the review includes a flashback, where the character relives a scene as if it were happening in real time.

ANALYSIS

Just as in real life, at some point after a significant incident we switch from reviewing that event to evaluating our new situation and finding the meaning of everything that has happened.ⁱⁱ The character might recall his short-term goal and determine how the scene resolution hindered or helped him achieve that goal. For example, after taking a bag of gold from an ogre, Jack may realize that having so much money could draw dangerous attention to him and his mother.

PLANNING

Eventually, the character begins to think ahead about how he can either (1) chart a new course of action to achieve his goal or (2) select a new short-term goal. In real life, we try to make decisions rationally and logically, and so should your character. To make this process believable, especially if the story is approaching a turning point, show the character's chain of thought.

The character might consider the merits of several options, rank them, and discard some. He may agonize over making a decision, examining the alternatives from

all angles and weighing the risks, or he might rush to judgment. The situation may involve equally unsatisfactory options, making the whole process a gut-wrenching dilemma. A character caught on the horns of a dilemma may have an epiphany that shows him the way forward. Once a character whittles his choices down to the best one, he may experience a flashforward that allows him to visualize his path to success.

The character is then able to lay out a plan for struggling forward to achieve his main objective.

DECISION

All that remains of the sequel is for the character to make a decision about his new course of action. Regardless of how the character gets there, and regardless of how long it took for the character to make his decision (whether it be instantaneous or prolonged), once he decides what to do, the sequel is over. For example, rather than spending his stolen gold, Jack and his mother might decide to keep it a secret until they develop a plan.

NEW SCENE

The moment the character takes action to achieve his new goal, a new scene begins. Remember, the definition of a *scene* is a passage of writing in which the character attempts to achieve a goal. The character might take dramatic action to begin a new scene (such as firing a pistol); or the action could be moderate, such as thumbing the safety lever of a handgun to the “off” position; or it may be as subtle as moving his hand closer to his holster.

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 Bickham, *Scene & Structure*, 55.

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