

SCENE & SEQUEL: The Ebb and Flow of Fiction By Mike Klaassen

Scene and sequel are two of the most important components of plot, but they also seem to be two of the least understood. They're an important part of the answer to the question of how to write page-turning fiction. If plot were an engine, scene and sequel would be the pistons powering the drive shaft. Writers striving to turbocharge their writing might want to fine-tune their use of scenes and sequels.

Let's put plot structure in context. On a micro level, plot consists of **action** and **reaction**. On a macro level, plot has a **beginning**, a **middle**, and an **ending**. But plot also has a midlevel structure: **scene** and **sequel**.

Scene is a unit of drama—where the **action** occurs. Then, after a **transition** of some sort, comes the sequel—an emotional reaction and regrouping, an **aftermath**.

The structures of scene and sequel are quite different, and they serve entirely different purposes. Many how-to books depict the **rising action** of a story as a jagged line, or stairway. What they fail to explain is that the up-thrust lines represent scenes, while the down-sloping lines represent sequels. A scene drives the story forward like a wave racing up the beach. A sequel pulls the wave back and gathers strength for the next scene to surge up the beach even farther than the previous scene. A novel without scenes would be boring, but without sequels, a story is just one event after another.

Let's take a closer look at scenes. Fiction-writing books mention at least a few of the following as being important to plot: tension, suspense, resolution, motivation, goals, stakes, obstacles, conflict, success, and failure. But most don't mention *all* of these elements, nor do they explain how they work together as part of a scene.

Basically, this is how a fully developed scene works.

- The **scene setup** establishes the **point of view**, which in many cases is that of the scene's main **character**. The setup also establishes **setting**, including time, especially in relation to the last scene or sequel.
- The character has **motivation** to achieve a specific **goal** and moves to achieve it.
- Failure to achieve the goal would result in the loss of something meaningful, i.e., **stakes**.
- An **obstacle** complicates the character's achievement of the goal.
- This creates **conflict**, which results in **frustration** for the character and **tension** for the reader.

- Since the character is properly motivated and the stakes are adequate for the situation, he tries to overcome the obstacle again and fails again and again, often in the give-and-take form of **stimulus** and **response**.
- This creates doubt as to whether the character will succeed, thus raising the level of **suspense** for the reader.
- The character is **confined** somehow to the situation, and since he has narrowing options and no outlet, **pressure** rises to a breaking point.
- The character tries yet again to overcome the obstacle, and this time (often his third attempt) his efforts **climax**, followed by the scene **resolution**.
- Resolution may be in the form of either **success** or **failure**, to one degree or another, depending on the needs of the story.
- Since **outright success** too early in the story would be anticlimactic, the more likely scene resolution would be **bittersweet success**, **outright failure**, **partial failure**, or **failure that leaves the character even farther from his goals** than when the scene started.

In one scene of my young-adult novel *Cracks*, the main character is driving an old Chevy Suburban through the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. Before he accomplishes his goal of reaching the highway, he must fend off the other characters, navigate a winding mountain road, and avoid hazards created by earthquakes. The scene ends in disaster which sets up a sequel and, ultimately, the rest of the story.

Once the scene has reached its resolution, the scene is over. And after an appropriate transition, the sequel may begin. Jack M. Bickham, in *Scene and Structure*,ⁱ presents a comprehensive explanation of sequel and its use.

Basically, this is how a fully developed sequel works:

- The resolution of the scene has left the character in a state of **emotion**, most likely **frustration** since the outcome was probably something less than outright success.
- As the character gains control of his feelings, he enters a time of **thought** where he begins to reason through the situation.
- In the process, the main character will **review** recent events.
- He will enter a phase of **analysis** to digest facts and better understand his predicament, including alternative courses of action available.
- From analysis will emerge a phase of **planning** regarding the next step.
- Once the character has planned his next move, he must make a **decision** to proceed.
- Then the character must **act** upon his decision, thus setting up the next scene.ⁱⁱ

In my novel *The Brute*, a sixteen-year-old boy is frustrated in his attempt to summon emergency help. A flooded creek blocks his route from the ranch house to the highway. Exhausted and discouraged, he plops down on an outcropping of

rock. He begins to think the situation through, to review his predicament, and to analyze it. A plan emerges. He makes a decision to act then proceeds to the next scene with a clear goal in mind.

One of the advantages of writing in scenes and sequels is flexibility. To meet the pacing needs of the story, scenes and sequels and their various components may be lengthened, shortened, skipped, or reversed in order. As Bickham explains, scenes and sequels may be difficult to recognize in published novels precisely because authors have varied their use to fit the needs of the story.ⁱⁱⁱ Flexibility in the use of scene and sequel allows the author to create an emotional roller coaster of ups, downs, twists, turns, and loops to engage and entertain the reader.

If your writing lacks get-up-and-go or seems to sputter like an engine in need of maintenance, maybe it's time for an overhaul of your scenes and sequels.

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 book at Amazon.com.

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ⁱ Bickham, Jack M., *Scene and Structure*, 1993, ISBN: 9780898795516, 51-56.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Bickham, Jack M., *Scene and Structure*, 1993, ISBN: 9780898795516, 72.