

USING SEQUELS TO ESTABLISH A CHARACTER'S SHORT-TERM GOALS

By Mike Klaassen

What do the following novels have in common?

- *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen
- *One for the Money* by Janet Evanovich
- *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card
- *American Assassin* by Vince Flynn
- *The Client* by John Grisham
- *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown

These novels have many things in common: memorable characters, engaging plot, interesting setting, resonating theme, and appropriate style. Each is a "page turner" that grips you from the opening lines and holds on until the end.

A closer look also reveals that these books include both scenes and sequels. Full disclosure: I have never communicated with any of the authors listed above; I have no way of knowing whether they support the concept of writing with scenes and sequels, or if they intentionally use them when they write. I just know that my study of their fiction reveals that both scenes and sequels are an important part of the structure of these novels. To me that raises the question of whether the rest of us are making optimal use of scenes and sequels in our own writing.

The value of scenes in fiction is widely accepted, and for good reason. Scenes propel the story forward, and they include the exciting, sexy, explosive parts of a story. You may be less familiar with the concept of sequels, so let's take a closer look.

Imagine you have written two great scenes that nicely move your story forward. In the first scene the focal character attempts to accomplish a short-term goal that he hopes will bring

him closer to achieving his primary objective in the story. He encounters resistance that knocks him so far back that he is even farther from achieving his goal than when he started the scene. The second scene shows the character pursuing an entirely different course of action.

This raises numerous questions:

- How did the character react emotionally to the devastating setback of the previous scene—or is he an emotionless, cardboard character?
- What was the character's thought process for determining his new course of action—or did he make a mindless snap decision?
- Did the character consider alternative courses of action—or did he impulsively go with the first solution that came to mind?
- Among several potential courses of action, did the character weigh the alternatives—or did he conveniently pick the one that the author needed to write the next scene?
- Did the character choose a plausible course of action, given the circumstances and the choices available—or will the reader question the character's judgment?
- Given the potential risks of the new course of action—does the character seem properly motivated—or does the new course of action seem implausible?
- Does the character's choice of a new course allow the reader to continue suspending disbelief—or does the new course risk shattering the fictive dream?
- Does the character's choice of a new course show him to be a thoughtful person worthy of the reader's continued interest—or does the decision show him to be erratic or careless?

You may be writing great scenes, but if they are not coupled with appropriate sequels, you may be missing up to half of your storytelling firepower. If you are not intimately familiar with

sequels, you may also lack sufficient understanding of scenes and how to unlock their full potential.

Fiction writers tend to fall into one of three camps: (1) *outliners*, who plan their work in detail prior to writing, (2) *free spirits*, who like to jump right in and see where inspiration and instinct lead, and (3) *tweeners*, those somewhere in between. Each of these styles has merit, and all three have drawbacks. Regardless of which style you use to create your first draft, you still face the challenge of polishing your manuscript into a seamless story. That's where a thorough understanding of scenes and sequels can really pay off: turning a mess into a work of art.

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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