

What Makes a Scene

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A story is a series of scenes connected by narration or summary.

A scene is action that takes place at a certain time and place where something significant happens. A scene is “showing, not telling.” Each scene has a point to it, **a reason for being written**. Each scene **shows something important** about the characters and the situation that helps to advance the plot or give important information so the reader feels and knows it on a visceral level. For instance, having breakfast is not a significant scene unless someone confesses a secret, demonstrates a changeable mood, or a gives a sign that something is about to happen or change.

People interact in a scene, and dialogue may be part of a scene. Included in a scene are **sensual details** such as sight, sound, smell, and a kinesthetic or feeling sense. Colors, texture and scent help the reader to feel and be in a scene. The most powerful memory sense for most people is the sense of smell.

Place, setting—Landscape, weather; buildings, towns, roads. All action and interaction takes place in a certain place on the earth. Each place has its own character that becomes inherently woven into the scene. For instance, the landscape of a New England fishing village is a very different place than in the middle of New Mexico. The urban setting of Los Angeles has a different feel from that of Chicago or New York. Weather can be a character in a piece—the lush, gentle breezes of Hawaii, a tornado in Missouri, or a snow storm in Maine all bring challenges to the people who live there and can be important part of people’s stories and histories.

Describing houses and homes, the details of architecture, outbuildings, chicken coops, basements or garages—all these spaces can be part of the setting of story and contribute to the feeling of the story.

Now with Google Maps we can find any location all over the world, even dip down and nearly look into windows of houses. Every location is part of a larger map of that place. Freeways, highways, back roads, rivers, train tracks—all these ways of getting from one place to another can be part of a story and are part of the landscape of the place. Think about where certain important moments take place and sketch out where things are in relation to each other. This can help you when you are writing about movement of people in a scene, or to capture the tone or subtle flavor of a scene.

Characters—Character portraits in action and dialogue

The people in our lives become “characters” in a story. Though you may feel very close to the people you write about or feel that you know them, you need to learn how to describe them in such a way that we can see and feel them, so the reader who has never met that person gets a sense of who they are.

- Situation—What is the situation or problem?
- Action—How do people react, move, respond?
- Dialogue—How do people talk, use language, words?
- Conflict—How do people express differences; what are their differences?
- Context, time in history—When does the story occur in time?
- Sensual details—How does the world feel, smell, taste, sound?

Narration and Voice

When a storyteller narrates, we hear the narrator’s voice. This voice weaves the story together, moving from scene on the stage to narration and summary. Narration and scene together create the story.

A scene may be written in past or present tense.

In memoir, the narrator uses the “I” voice.

Scenes take place “In Time.” Narration or summary sweeps across time—a span of years can be handled in such a sentence:

“For five years we lived like that, and then one day...” The narrator brings us to another time frame.

Point of View

In memoir, the narrator’s voice is telling the story from the point of view and consciousness that you choose—a child of five, a teen with attitude, or an adult. The voice and tone change depending on the emotions and challenges being depicted, as well as the age of the narrator. POV: “I” point of view for most memoirs, though Mary Karr uses second person “you” in her memoir *Cherry*.

Remember: The Purpose of a Scene

Each story and chapter in a story, and every scene has a shape, a beginning, middle, and end, and something important happens in each. The purpose of a scene is to bring the

reader into the time frame, feeling, and full sensual experience of that time, place, and point of view of the narrator and "I" character in the scene.

A scene exists to show something significant, and often life changing, in the story. Be sure that each of your scenes has something important happen, not just be an incident you put in the memoir because "it really happened that way." In a story, you select the important moments, and leave out the rest.