

Holly Lisle's

How To Write

Page-Turning Scenes



Nonfiction

A Step-By-Step Course in Keeping Readers
Turning *YOUR* Pages Long Past Bedtime

HOLLY LISLE

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Long Past Bedtime

THE SCENES CLINIC



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DEDICATION

To Becky, who wrote mornings with me as I finished this, while we cheered each other on

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Well, easier.

The mistakes that remain are all mine.

(But the couple of *ain'ts* in there are intentional.)

About the Author



Holly Lisle has published more than thirty novels (and counting) with publishers from Penguin and Tor to HarperCollins, Scholastic, Warner, and Baen. She writes fantasy, science fiction, paranormal suspense and the occasional secret project in other genres, and is VERY online.

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Holly Lisle's Novel-Writing School

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Introduction

You want to keep your readers hanging on your every word, but every time you relax your vigilance, your characters start lounging around, talking about the weather, drinking coffee and leaning against walls.

Or perhaps you get fascinated by your own worldbuilding, and when you look up from writing, you discover what you've done is a twenty-page infodump.

Maybe your scenes race by so fast that when you read them back, you find the barest sketch of the picture you had in your head while you were writing.

Or just maybe you haven't got the hang of doing scenes yet at all.

It's okay. Every one of us who started writing, started with all of those problems and a host of others. And every single problem is fixable. In this course, you'll be working your way from the simplest of scenes through to the most complex. You'll start building with basic scene blocks, write short, compelling practice scenes, and add complexity as you go.

You'll learn how to avoid common pitfalls, find the excitement and conflict in each scene, and write just the important parts.

And we'll have fun working through this.

Ready?

Let's go.

What You'll Need

The neat thing about scenes is that they require no special tools and no special software. There are, however, a few things you might find helpful in visualizing your scenes, so I'll recommend them here. There are only a couple things you'll *need*. There are several things you might *want*.

You will need:

- A notebook to write in. These exercises are best done away from the computer.
- A smooth-writing pen or three.
- A kitchen timer, microwave timer, egg timer. Anything that will go to ten minutes, and that doesn't go off with a sound that scares the socks off of you. **For each exercise**, (with a couple of exceptions which I'll point out when you get there), **you'll write either until you finish, or for ten minutes, whichever comes first.**

You may want:

- Graph paper, the 4-5-blocks-to-an-inch sort, for sketching out room and house layouts—especially useful for dramatic chase and fight scenes, but also pretty good for just not having your characters wandering around clueless, or for having rooms mysteriously flit from first to second floor and from east to west.
- Sketches or cut-out pictures of your characters
- Access to a bunch of different kinds of cloth, building materials, household objects, and assorted junk; planned visits to every restaurant in your area that serves something you've never eaten before; the largest selection of music in types you don't regularly like or listen to that you can legally acquire (even including a small cross-section of what aficionados consider the very best examples of musical genres you flat-out hate), and regular trips to places where things smell bad.

I've found that writers are generally pretty good about getting nice smells right, but for those of you who have not been around corpses or trauma victims, blood does not smell like copper (it smells like iron), and decaying human flesh has a unique stink that goes straight to your brain and makes your hair stand on end. Frankly, I don't find that burned human beings, living or dead, smell particularly like pork, either. (You learn a lot of horrible things as an ER nurse.)

And neither subways, nor the people on subways, generally smell like roses.

How To Use This Course

Read **The Basics** first.

Once you've done that, you'll head straight into the exercises. I've put them into what is, to me, a logical working order, and have planned the course so that if you work straight through, you'll build from easiest to most complex.

However, if you know you have an area where you have trouble, you can certainly skip around. You might want to come back and hit all areas, though, because I've been careful not to repeat techniques as I've worked through this—by exploring my techniques for processy you already know, you might discover a new way of doing something that will make your job easier.

I've tried to make this as logical, practical, and fun as possible.

THE BASICS

What Is A Scene?

I'm not going to bother with Webster's definition of a scene here, or with quoting The Learned Sages of Writing. This is not an English class, so I'm going to throw things at you that are not what you learned in English. Or Creative Writing. Or whatever classes you might have taken. A lot of the tools, techniques, and even classifications in this course are things I made up because I needed them, and I could not find anything like them in all the information I read about creative writing, or novel writing. Or English.

I've named them; you won't be able to cross-reference what I'm telling you against books by experts, professors, or anyone else. These are tools *I* built to get me through novels on time.

Here, as throughout the rest of the book, I'll simply show you my working definition of the tool, and then I'll show you how to use it. Other folks may disagree with me and my process (I guarantee some of them will, actually). But after years of making a living writing novels, I've discovered there is no one right way to do this. You are not party to the unfolding of *The Secret Truth of Writing Scenes*. You're just trying out my truth, small "t". This is my way, and it's one of many. Take what I offer, learn what other writers offer, and build your own process from the pieces that work for you.

With that said, my working definition of a Scene:

You have written a scene when something important changes.

Definitions don't get much starker than that.

But then, neither do some scenes.

One instant, I was watching a nine-year old girl crossing the street. Then I blinked, and she was gone.

While I can, right offhand, think of a dozen ways to expand this scene beyond two sentences, and another dozen things I want to know about the girl, and the situation, and the watcher, I do have a complete scene right there. Something both unexpected and critical happened. We have every expectation that a nine-year-old girl crossing the street will start on one side and end on the other. Any variance from that can, if it relates to the rest of your story, be an important change.

The Parts of a Scene

Scenes can, in fact, get even simpler than the one I wrote above. In order to have a complete scene, you need to have:

1. A thing to be changed
2. Change

Not two people, not one person, not even an observer beyond the omniscient narrator. Just a thing to be changed. And change.

Here is an example of the simplest of all possible scenes. (Not the shortest. Just the simplest.) Omniscient narrator, no characters, no props, one change.

White wall, white ceiling, cold and stark and simple. And silence, nonbreathing silence, patient, without creaks or ticks or hums. Light, morning light came through that far window and cast squares of whiter white high up, and dust motes sparkled. And then a stain on the white ceiling, first pale, and then dark red like old roses, red that grew glossy, a little mar in the perfection. And then a drop. Red. Slid from the ceiling down the wall, a single jagged line that traced itself over textured paint, dancing, dancing, while the dust motes sparkled and the bright white squares of the morning sun tracked down the wall ahead of it.

It doesn't take a lot to build a compelling scene, to catch the attention, to make the reader shiver just a little and picture not just a corner of a wall with squares of light on it, but a body lying dead and still and punctured somewhere up above.

If the thing is an unmarred white wall and the change is the appearance of the blood, you have your reader's attention. We'll work on figuring out which changes are good and which are boring later on. For now, just remember that not all

changes are created equal.

A *thing* and *change*, of course, are not the only parts of a scene. In most scenes, you'll have overt conflict, storytelling, time and place. Characters. Dialogue. Action. Description. Sensory details. Pacing. Backstory. Transitions in and out.

Let's run through them quickly here, just by definition. And let's start with conflict, which is not your next-door neighbors involved in a shouting match that involves flying household objects.

Conflict is, simply put, change. Anytime something changes, it creates ripples that will be good for some people, bad for others. And it comes in five flavors. (Again, these are my categories, not the ones you'll learn in a formal writing course taught in college.)

- **Implied conflict** makes a promise to the reader that something happened, and that it was important. However, implied conflict hides the following critical information: what actually happened, who it happened to, and why it was important. Blood dripping through a ceiling and running down a wall is implied conflict. Somewhere out of sight, something is bleeding, and we as readers want to know why, and how it got that way, and who was involved.
- **Omniscient conflict**, like implied conflict, makes a promise to the reader, but at the same time withholds critical information. Omniscient conflict permits the reader to *see* the important change take place (the conflict) but does not permit the reader to know who will be affected by the change, or what dominoes the change will knock over.
- **Internal conflict** makes your character suffer with his own issues. Your character wants something and can't have it, or has something he wants to get rid of, or wants to do something he can't, shouldn't, or won't. He has his reasons. Your job is to get them out of him by any means necessary.
- **Interpersonal conflict**, whether subtle or extreme, involves your character interacting with at least one other character. Your hero and another character both want things that get in the way of each other's wants. Your hero wants to have a baby, and her husband wants to tour Europe on a bicycle with her. Your hero wants to build the world's greatest skyscraper and his antagonist wants to save the trees on the land where he wants to build. Like that.
- **External conflict** is some variation, large or small, on "THE SKY IS FALLING!" Your character is beset by impersonal, external forces that endanger, frustrate, or impede him. Falling comets, looming war, six straight weeks of cold, drizzling rain, visits by relatives.... no, NOT visits by relatives! Well, yes, visits by relatives, if the impending **visit** is the cause of his stress, anxiety, or even sudden homicidal urges. Once the relatives actually arrive, the type of conflict changes to interpersonal conflict.

All of these forms of conflict can appear in the same scene, and adding additional forms of conflict is one good way of making scenes longer without padding.

Storytelling can be a beast. If each scene must move the story forward, and you have to write the scenes to tell the story, then it stands to reason that you have to know what the story is about before you write the scenes.

It does. It's a perfectly logical assumption.

Problem is, *it just ain't true*. Many is the book I've written thinking I knew what the story was about, only to discover—at some brutal stuck point three-quarters of the way through—it was about some entirely other thing, and would have to be massively rewritten. Truth is, many times you only think you understand the story you're writing. Only once it's written and revised do you discover what it's really about.

This is not a reassuring truth. Most things that are true are not reassuring. But wishing them different will not make them so.

So what do you do to prevent the many wrong turns and bad decisions and lapses of judgment that make you throw out ten or twenty or sixty thousand words?

Having thrown out tens of thousands of words from just about every book I've ever written, I wish I had a better answer

for this. Some wreckage, I'm convinced, is inevitable. But to prevent evitable and excessive wreckage, try this:

EXERCISE: Your Story As You Imagine It

(Yeah, an exercise. I even stuck one in **The Basics**. I wasn't going to, but you might as well get this out of the way now. You'll need it from the moment you begin considering your story until the book is in print.)

- Write your theme in fifteen words or less.

EXAMPLES:

The struggle for survival in a world where nothing comes easy.

The triumph of determination over chaos and entropy.

The search for life's meaning.

- Write what the book is about in 30 words or less.

EXAMPLES:

Married couple with kids and jobs buy haunted house out to kill them.

Mad wizards use blood magic to build empire; survivor fights back.

One man who lost everything in a civil war finds new purpose in helping other survivors.

- Write down a one-sentence story arc for the main character.

EXAMPLES:

Bob scrapes and saves to buy a house in the suburbs for his family, then fights to keep it and make it safe.

Anika returns to her village to discover everyone she ever knew has been slaughtered or kidnapped; she plans both rescue and revenge.

John, raised rich, ends up on his own when his family loses everything; he discovers meaning in his life by helping others.

Here are a couple of real examples from my own books:

One battle-scarred soldier finds love with her enemy and discovers the kindness of strangers masks a plot to enslave her people AND his.—TALYN

God puts Hell on parole in the Bible Belt in ironic answer to an ICU nurse's prayer...and she falls in love with the fallen angel sent to damn her.—SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

- Write your back-of-the-book blurb in 250 words or less. I'll only do one of these.

Young John Tanner's family backed the wrong side in the civil war between the Eastern Union and the Western Alliance, and when the war ended, they lost home, wealth, and even each other. John, taken along with other children of the losing side to work as a servant in the East, rebels quietly. Determined to help himself and his fellow captives get back home, he befriends the enemy, gets to know his captors, and works his way into a position of trust.

While it becomes hard to hate his captors as he grows to know them, being a captive never becomes easy—and finding ways to get his people back to their own land gives him something to live for... until he discovers that his own family did not survive the early days of occupation.

By having this information on hand, you improve your chances of writing the book you actually want to write, and not

one you fall into halfway through. Your odds of avoiding a brutal massacre of a revision go up to about 50%.

Don't mind my cynicism. I've only tossed a couple million words or so by now.

Time and Place is simple in theory. You use elements of light and movement, the color of leaves outside, weather, complaints about weather, and other such things to put your reader into the scene. In fact, of course, it can get tricky. And it can be a headache to track.

Characters shouldn't need much explanation. They show up. They argue with you. They screw up the story and do what they want rather than what you want. And then you kill them. 'Nuff said.

Dialogue is where you try to **make conversations sound real** and relaxed **without making them real**, because real conversations are rife with ums and ahs and uhs and frequently rotate around minutiae and never get to the point. You can use bits of real conversation, but only with characters you don't like or want your reader to like. Truth is, we all sound better in our heads than we do on a tape recorder.

Action is making things happen. It can be little things, like picking up a pair of scissors from a table and dropping them into a pocket. It can be big things, like running from a psychopath wielding a pair of scissors. It can be boring things, like drinking coffee or tea while reading news on a computer screen. It can have nothing to do with characters: blood dripping down a wall is action. It moves, right? That's action. Movement. Every scene needs to have something that moves, or it runs the risk of losing the reader. Think of keeping the attention of a cat by jiggling a string, and then remember that as mammals, we have the same wiring. Jiggle a string at us from time to time to keep our attention.

Description goes wrong on two ends—when you have too much, and when you don't have enough. Either will wreck your scene, but only the first one is likely to also kill your reader. If you err, err on the side of too little description, because it is psychologically easier to add than to subtract while doing revisions. We'll work on how when we get to that section.

Description also goes wrong in the middle, where you don't know what things are like (but think you do from seeing them on TV or reading other books), and so describe them incorrectly. This is why you need access to things like cloth scraps and piles of arcane tools and emergency rooms and roughing-it camping trips...and access to people who have done things you haven't done and can't reach for the really tough details. I won't be saying anything else about this part of description. It is your job as a writer to get the details right, and to double-check your facts. You'll always end up with errors, but strive to make the fewest you can.

Sensory details are the things your character sees, feels, tastes, hears, smells, or gets through any sort of sixth sense. And if the character isn't there to sense them, the omniscient narrator is. You should put your best effort into engaging some of your reader's senses in every scene, even in very tiny ways. The subconscious mind picks up even subtle sensory cues and accepts them as real, and this drags your reader into the story, instead of letting him sit above it.

Pacing can be fairly hard to get right, but getting it right is a learnable skill. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the length of the chapter, and everything to do with the reader's perception of the passage of time as he reads through the chapter. Long chapters can fly, short chapters can drag. The exercises on pacing, however, are a lot of fun.

Backstory. Ah, backstory. All the stuff that happened before your story started, all the world that encompasses your story, all the history, grandeur, tragedy, and humor. And the temptation for every writer, myself included, is to jam as much of that wonderful stuff into the story as possible.

It is a temptation that must be resisted at all costs. After I nearly broke Charles Ryan, editor of *Aboriginal SF*, back when I was first starting out—his rejection letter on one story read “Much, much, much, much too much exposition,”—I learned a few tricks. Worked in through all the exercises in the other sections of this course, you'll learn them here.

Transitions in and out are probably the easiest bits of scenes to get right. But judging from the volume of mail I get on that subject, they're one of the parts of writing new writers sweat bullets over. You'll love the transition exercises. You won't ever sweat a transition again. For now, just remember this. There is no such thing as a transitional scene.

Candy Bar Scenes, and Everything Else

“Candy bar scenes” is my term for the scenes that made you want to write the story in the first place. A candy bar scene might be where the hero and the heroine finally realize that they are on the same side, and would really like to get closer; or where your heroine runs across the dragon in her backyard for the first time; or, where your detective comes sliding out of a nice restaurant a step behind his date, to see her being dragged into a black sedan with tinted windows—just before a thug conks him on the back of the head with a bag of pennies.

What you find sweet will vary. Ideally, you'd love to write a book where every single scene is something that your fingers itch to write, and it is in fact possible to do this. Other scenes, the non-candy-bar scenes, are just the ones you haven't figured out how to make delectable enough yet. We'll work on that.

There may be some scenes that turn out to be necessary in spite of the fact that they don't ever win your heart. It's one of those facts of life that we can never love all things equally, even though we might wish to. For those necessary but unloved scenes, we'll work on figuring out ways to at least make them better than canned spinach.

THE EXERCISES

The exercises start with a description of the technique, followed by an example. Then instructions on how you can achieve the same effect in the scene in question, and where I've found each technique particularly useful. And finally, the part where you sit down and write.

Each section is short, and you will probably be able to go through several in one sitting. The objective is not to write full-blown two-thousand-word scenes here, but to learn the techniques that you can then apply, when necessary, to two-thousand-word scenes, if you so choose.

Conflict

Conflict is change. It can be good change, or bad change. It can be direct or indirect. It can involve words spoken, physical action, or the simple movement of a bit of scenery from one side of a room to another. It can be enormous, or so subtle the reader will only pick it up subliminally, and have a cool “ah-ha!” moment later when you come back to that tiny cue.

There are only two absolutes about conflict.

First, every scene must have some conflict.

Second, the conflict must move the story forward.

Let's take another look at my tiny scene with the wall and the drop of blood.

White wall, white ceiling, cold and stark and simple. And silence, nonbreathing silence, patient, without creaks or ticks or hums. Light, morning light came through that far window and cast squares of whiter white high up, and dust motes sparkled. And then a stain on the white ceiling, first pale, and then dark red like old roses, red that grew glossy, a little mar in the perfection. And then a drop. Red. Slid from the ceiling down the wall, a single jagged line that traced itself over textured paint, dancing, dancing, while the dust motes sparkled and the bright white squares of the morning sun tracked down the wall ahead of it.

This scene uses *indirect* conflict. That is, the direct conflict happened somewhere else, at some other time, and what the reader sees is not the rock being thrown into the pond, or the presumed victim being murdered, but the ripples in the water. A drop of blood dripping down white paint, coming from somewhere above.

Indirect Conflict

Your first assignment is going to be to write a short scene with no characters, using indirect conflict. Here's how you do it:

1. Tell yourself that something happened ten minutes ago, or an hour ago, or a day ago. **You don't have to know what it was.** I had no idea what I was going to write when I started with the white wall. I just started with a literal white canvas, and then imagined something changing it.
2. Create a simple set that includes one sensory detail. Your set can be a room, a field, the inside of a car, the inside of a big cardboard box, an empty alley. Your sensory detail could be:
 - **Sound:** a telephone ringing, unanswered, or a dog barking behind a closed door.
 - **Smell:** smoke from an oven, or the faintest whiff of something unpleasant and unknown curling out from under a locked door.
 - **Taste:** bitterness where there should be none, or something delicious.
 - **Touch:** fingertips dangling from the side of a bed, too cold, or unbearable heat in the middle of a desert.
 - **Sight** is the easiest one. You have light and the absence of light, color, shape, and movement. Just pick one and jump.
3. Make one important change. *Important* is the critical word here. Even if you don't know what your story is about, even if you don't know what happened to cause the change that you're about to write down, understand that when you change something, you're telling the reader that this change is meaningful. So you also tell yourself that it's meaningful, and then you work to build the plot around that change so you're telling the truth.

When To Use Indirect Conflict

Indirect conflict is good for foreshadowing, whether you're using it with characters or with an omniscient narrator. It's useful for flashbacks and flashforwards, too. It allows you to hide what's going on while still letting the reader know that something is. It forces the reader to wonder. And it lets you deceive the reader honestly, letting him jump to obvious

conclusions.

In the white wall-dripping blood scene, your reader will make assumptions like the body the blood is leaking from is dead, human, or the victim. If you make the red stuff paint, however, you just cheated, and your reader will hate you, because dripping paint is NOT an important change. (Unless it is. I leave it up to you to figure out why it might be.)

EXERCISE: Indirect Conflict

- Write a maximum of 200 words (about one handwritten page if you give yourself nice margins), in which you describe the starting position of your scene (clean wall, quiet street, messy bedroom, empty desert) and then you introduce your one change, including sensory detail. Make sure that whatever actually caused the change (the absence of a person who should have been there, for example) is not in sight or mentioned. All you want with indirect conflict is a symptom with no visible cause. *Why IS that dog barking? No one is out there.*
- When you have described your change, you're done.

Direct Conflict

All the other kinds of conflict are direct conflict, in that the reader can see what is going on.

However, in the first flavor we're going to run through, we're still withholding significant information. The reader will know what changed (which we withhold in Indirect Conflict), but will continue to not know who that change affects, or why it matters. He will continue to have to trust you to make sure that it does. You do not want to abuse that trust. So...

Omniscient Conflict

We've already outlined the three big sources of direct conflict: internal, interpersonal, and external. But direct conflict can sometimes involve *only* the reader. We'll start with that here.

EXAMPLES:

- A light burns out on the front porch.
- A cigarette smoldering under a couch catches fire.
- A cat (that you don't intend to use as a character) jumps onto a table to look at a bird on a windowsill, and knocks something that was resting there to the floor, where it slides out of sight.

Let me demonstrate.

The cat's rump wriggled, his tail twitched, and he leapt onto the table, claws scrabbling on the wood. The bird on the windowsill ignored him until the cat launched himself at the glass, sending papers stacked on the edge of the table flying, and smacking his head loudly against the windowpane. Then, of course, the bird flew off. Probably laughing.

The papers the cat had disturbed scattered everywhere, and one small blue envelope landed behind the philodendron sitting in the corner next to the table—where gravity and an unfortunately ornate plant container hid it from view.

Notice that the reader sees the change, understands what the change was, knows (because you took the time to write about it, and therefore promised that it would be important) that the blue envelope behind the philodendron is going to be important. But no characters are involved. We have the tiny conflict of change, without the bigger involvement of characters.

When To Use Omniscient Conflict

Again, this is a great technique for foreshadowing if the structure of your story allows it. (Much more on structures and how to use them in *Holly Lisle's Create A Plot Clinic*, pages 22-37, ebook version.) It's a wonderful technique for flashbacks and flashforwards, too. Don't rely on it too much. This is one of those spices, like scenes with indirect conflict, that you break out two or three times per book, maximum.

EXERCISE: Omniscient Conflict

- Write a maximum of two hundred words in which you show the reader something happening that will prove to be important to the story. You do not need to know yet why it will be important. Trust your subconscious to hand you something interesting. Write this scene as the change is happening, and include:
 - Setting.
 - Change (conflict).
- Stop when you've made your important change.

Internal Conflict

Now we're showing more, hiding less. Internal conflict is the character's fight with himself over something he wants but can't have, has but doesn't want, or needs in spite of the fact that he cannot or will not or fears to get it. It can be done through description, internal or external dialogue, or action. The reader sees the moment of change, as well as the struggle leading up to it, and has some clue (as much as you care to share) about why it's important.

Showing *internal conflict* in a scene does not necessarily involve *internal dialogue*—that is, one character alone, sitting still, thinking about things. Internal dialogue is what many writers first think of when they think of internal conflict, though. Unfortunately, writing a character sitting still and thinking and making this interesting is one of the hardest things to do well when writing, so a lot of bad scenes happen when inexperienced writers collide with internal conflict.

CRITICAL POINT: Remember that **Internal Conflict** and **Internal Dialogue** are NOT the same thing!

Let's start, then, by breaking internal conflict out of the internal dialogue box.

You can show internal conflict by:

- Having a character take actions against himself (the image that popped into my head for this was doing what's called delicate cutting—carving designs into his own skin with a razor blade or sharp knife). No words need be involved. (Action)
- Having him scream at his reflection in a mirror; mutter to himself in public; write a letter the reader can read, then tear it up before the intended recipient can receive it; pray out loud in public or private, or in other ways carry on a conversation with himself while doing something interesting. (Dialogue)
- Show a place where he lives, detailing things about his home that are out of place, off kilter, unsettling in ways either large or small—the house is too neat, too messy, has items in it that are illegal, immoral, or confusing (an example of confusing would be a bookshelf filled with books that were each covered in shrink-wrapped plastic, with price stickers still attached, so we could see that, although he has hundreds of books, he has never read one of them), and so on. (Description)

You can, of course, have the character sitting at a table drinking tea and thinking to himself, but if you do, it had better be about something like how he plans to take over the universe, rescue a missing woman single-handed, or invent time travel. If he's sitting there thinking about how he doesn't know what he wants to do with himself, your readers are going to want to kill him. Or you. And they'll have a good excuse.

Here's my little internal conflict demonstration, done primarily with description, but with a bit of action and the faintest hint of internal dialogue thrown in:

Steve laid out his tools in front of him on the kitchen table. Scalpel, sterile towels, a stainless steel measuring cup, cotton swabs with long, slender wood grips, rubbing alcohol. His heart raced, and his gut felt tight, and he couldn't quite get his buttocks to sit still on the chair. He kept shifting, even though he knew that if he didn't sit still, he was going to screw things up. The room was cool, but he sweated. The single bulb in the light overhead suddenly felt too dim. He could hear flies buzzing, and he wasn't sure if that was real, or if it was guilt. He'd promised. He'd promised. But the scalpel gleamed pure and silver in the dim light, promising release through pain. The alcohol, its lid already removed, smelled like freedom.

He pulled his shirt off, getting a whiff of his own sour sweat, noting that his palms were slick. It had been a while. Two years. He took a deep breath and poured rubbing alcohol into the bottom of the measuring cup, while outside and down the street, he heard a door slam. The scum-bag neighbor, cheating on his wife, sneaking home at two AM again.

Steve dipped the cotton swab into the alcohol, took a slow breath to get himself under control, and swabbed his scarred chest, dead center, right over his breastbone. And then he picked up the scalpel, and remembered the time his mother had walked in on him bleeding, remembered the time his father had dragged him out behind the house and whipped him with a hickory switch for doing this very thing.

Not this time.

He sliced into the skin, a gently curving arc, shallow, just deep enough to draw blood, and the real pain bit him, and the sounds of flies and neighbors, the smell of sweat, the ugly endless memories, all went away.

My promise to the reader of this scene is that Steve cutting himself is important. The self-cutting was the last change, and it was the change that the description led up to. His parents get a mention, and they may or may not matter—that's up to me to decide later. They could become a huge part of this story, if I decide that Steve murdered them. They could become significant but not critical, if I decide that their deaths in a car accident are what caused Steve to go back to cutting himself.

The neighbor may or may not matter. Maybe Steve likes his wife. Maybe Steve used to like him. Or maybe he watches them without them even noticing him, and makes up stories about them, pretending he knows them. Maybe he will one day act on his story instead of the truth.

My point here, however, is that, while this short scene holds all sorts of further possibilities for development, it starts by hinting at the cutting, and ends with the cutting, and the cutting is the demonstration of internal conflict that is the point of the scene.

When To Use Internal Conflict

Your purpose in using internal conflict is to let the reader know what your character wants, needs, and fears. It's as simple as that. You want to let your reader gain an understanding of who your conflicted character is, and you want them to be right there with him. They don't have to agree with him. They don't have to feel compassion, or sympathy, or any sort of liking for him. They don't have to wish him well. But when you're writing internal conflict, you are giving them the chance to know him and to some extent, why he is who and what he is.

EXERCISE: Internal Conflict

You clearly need a character for this exercise. Walls and tables do not suffer from internal conflict, so now we have to bring in the folks.

You can get your character in one of three ways. If you're working through this course with a story already in mind, or in progress, bring on your hero, drop him or her in the driver's seat, and go.

If you just want to get your head around the exercise, select a placeholder name, (mine are usually Bob and Kate), do no character development whatsoever, and just see what happens.

If you don't have a story in mind, don't have a character in mind, and have a hard time coming up with characters, pick up a copy of my *Create A Character Clinic*—

<http://novelwritingschool.com/recommends/character-clinic>

For the sake of momentum in this particular exercise, however, I recommend options one and two.

Ready?

- For the sake of simplicity, put your character someplace alone.

In an empty church, in the back pasture of a big farm, in the desert, in an attic, in bed trying to go to sleep, in a ditch trying to wake up.

- Give him an issue he has to work through.

He's a cop whose bullet went through the man shooting at him and backstopped in the pregnant woman fleeing the gunfire; she's a farm girl torn between her dreams of deep space exploration and the family who will stay behind on Earth; he's a professional killer beset by an attack of conscience; she's a thief who has to rob this decent family or lose the biggest commission she's ever been offered; he's just broken up with the girl he loved because he found out she's been running around on him; she partied too hard and has found herself alone in a gutter in an alley, with no memory of how she got there, and the realization that she needs to fix her life.

- Write 200 words or less in which you show your character's inner conflict without the use of internal dialogue.

Use:

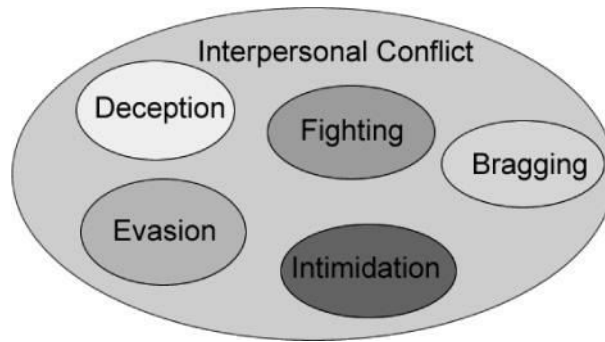
- a. Action
- b. Out-loud dialogue
- c. Description

Interpersonal Conflict

This is the conflict everyone understands. Two people (or more than two people) hold opposite (or different) points on an issue. Two people have different needs that are getting in the way of each other. But when you're just getting started, it's easy to think of conflict as arguing, and to have your characters bicker at each other *ad nauseam*. Conflict is not fighting. (Fighting is conflict, but conflict is not fighting.)

There is an entire range of other ways your characters can deal with each other directly (never mind all the things they can do behind each other's backs) to escalate or resolve a conflict, or just to keep the damn thing dragging on interminably.

Here, look:



Each of these categories within Interpersonal Conflict (and this is not every possibility, this is just a few) can be broken down into further subcategories.

- Deception
 - Outright lying
 - Vagueness
 - Claim of misunderstanding
 - Changing the subject
 - Acting like everything is fine
- Evasion
 - Walking away
 - Changing the subject
 - Misdirecting anger onto some other target
 - Staying out all night
- Intimidation
 - Physical threats
 - Physical assault
 - Claiming the other person is the guilty party
 - Verbal threats
 - Verbal attacks
 - Leaving dead animals on the doorstep
- Bragging
 - Grandiose actions

- Big spending
- Elective plastic surgery
- Padding a résumé
- Big talk
- Fighting
 - Mild bickering
 - Running each other down
 - Eye-rolling
 - Shouting matches
 - Not speaking to each other
 - Throwing things
 - Smiling know-it-all smiles
 - Acting condescending

Better yet, each category and sub-category can be written as Action, as Description, and as Dialogue, or any combination of the three.

Even better than “better yet,” each category and subcategory lends itself well to various takes on the scene: you can write it angry, witty, funny, slapstick, scary, tense, and on and on.

But that's not all, as those TV ads always say. Interpersonal conflict doesn't have to be negative interaction. If different people are trying to get the same thing accomplished, only in different ways, the struggle is not always a fight. Remember, conflict is change—and one character changing the mind of another through a demonstration of skill or competence (or massive, hilarious ineptness) is still conflict.

A guy trying to pick up a girl—even a girl who is attracted to the guy—that's interpersonal conflict. If he succeeds, that's change. If he fails, that's change. A woman trying to teach a six-year-old kid to knit—that's interpersonal conflict. There's discussion, there's action, and there's success or failure or some sort of progress in between, whether you show it through action, description, dialogue, or some combination of the three. Two guys sitting on a dock fishing and discussing the bait they're using... that's conflict. It's a human interaction in which one guy is trying to convince the other of the superiority of his method (whether either one is getting results or not). Two men or two women bragging about their sexual exploits is conflict. Each is trying to gain some sort of status in the eyes of the other, and the outcome will be success or failure, or some middling change.

In every scene, you have to figure out what each character involved wants to accomplish. You have to know what the change each hopes to effect is, and then you have to decide whether the outcome is *win*, *lose*, or *draw*. Don't pick *draw* too often.

Conflict is change, and your objective in interpersonal conflict, as with any other conflict, is to get out of the scene with something changed between the two characters.

If you're saying, “But that's not like real life—lots of times conflict in real life doesn't result in any change at all. Those morons who disagreed when we started arguing STILL disagree,” well, *you're not writing real life*. You're writing fiction, and **the object of a scene in fiction is to give some appearance of real life while still moving the story forward.**

Don't get hung up on real life—real life, compared to fiction, can have its moments (and hours, and days, and years) of mind-numbing monotony, pointless stupidity, and mindless brutality.

In fiction, everything you do has a point. Including seemingly pointless, stupid verbal arguments between characters. If you put one in there, you have to create a change at the end. This is not a should. **This is a must.** Pointless scenes that go nowhere will guarantee that your stories don't sell.

When To Use Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict is the Swiss Army knife of conflict. If you whip out the right attachment, it will work anywhere. Dialogue, action, description, flashbacks, flashforwards, comedies of manners, humor, suspense, tragedy, hardboiled

detective fiction. You don't have to use it in every scene, but you need to use it in a lot of them.

EXERCISE: *Interpersonal Conflict*

I'm going to give you three situations. Pick one, then write two hundred fifty words using ANY category except Fighting/Verbal, to show your conflict.

- Lizzy discovers that Stan took her rare copy of the book Willowhound Saga, and he's just walked into the room.
- Stan wants to go watch hockey at the local arena with the guys on the same day that Lizzy wants to go to a concert with him, and both have just discovered this conflict in their calendars.
- Stan just heard a rumor that Lizzy was out running around with his best friend.

Remember, either character can be guilty or innocent, both characters can be cool, both characters can be jerks, and both characters can have their intentions and actions misread or misunderstood. The scene can be grim or funny or flirty, scary or suspenseful. The stakes could be life or death, or a romantic interlude, and the setting could be the past, the future, the present, this world or any other. Lizzy could have been out with Stan's best friend buying him the pair of hockey pads Jim knows he's been lusting after. We don't know. So explore your options for a couple of minutes before you start writing.

External Conflict

- The world is coming to an end! Asteroid at 11.
- The car broke down in the middle of I-95 during rush hour.
- Howard, Jill, and their little dog Toto are suddenly eaten by a killer whale.
- The Rangers are fighting for the Stanley Cup, and you're a fan 600 miles from the action.
- The town passed an ordinance that everyone under the age of 65 is required to wear a silly hat with bunny ears when out in public.
- Your town is overrun by rats carrying Genetically Engineered Jiffy Plague.
- World War III just started.
- Aliens invade, carrying Really Big Guns.
- Bob and Kate's house develops a crack in the foundation.

External conflict is the last haven of victimhood in fiction. Your characters can whine and wail and say, “It wasn't my fault! Somebody take care of me! Somebody SAVE me!” And some of them, the ones readers are going to despise, no doubt will.

But external conflict is the furnace in which you smelt great characters, both the ones readers will love, and the ones they'll love to hate. (You want your readers to love to hate your villains, not to despise them for being whiny or spineless. Villains have good, strong spines—in the metaphorical sense—just like heroes. They simply choose to fight for chaos rather than against it.) Bad things happen, and the great among your characters will step up and fight. And the vile among your characters will side with the bad things, further them, aid and abet them, and in other ways work toward the downfall of the side you want to win.

External conflict is the thing that will bring people of like mind together, and that will drive a giant wedge between those who are not of like mind.

Let's look at that asteroid for a minute. You know, and I know, that there are going to be people who leap into the frenzy that follows the news by figuring out ways to divert the asteroid. There are going to be people who will organize food-storage drives and shelters and first-aid stations. There are going to be people who rise to the occasion by showing the best that lies within them. Part of your story will be about them.

There will be the majority, who throw their hands in the air and cry from the day they find out until the day the thing either smashes some portion of the planet into component atoms, or doesn't. Your story won't be about them, except as they get in the way of the people who are trying to accomplish something good.

And finally, there will be the skeeves and the creeps, the scum and the outright villains. These will be the folks who embrace the chaos, go on loot-rape-and-pillage sprees, make a killing jacking the prices of goods and services to astronomical levels, and gather together in groups to actively cause the “save the world” contingent to fail, simply because they believe that the universe would be a better place without humans in it.

My take on that last item is 'you first, pal,' but never mind my take. Much of your story is going to be about them, simply because there is no issue that is going to have a consensus. People don't agree on anything. **Anything**. And if you were giving away free gold, there would be people who would disagree with that.

You're devaluing the gold. You're helping people who won't help themselves. You're causing people to sin from lust and greed. You're... whatever. Just whatever, man. No matter what you do, there are going to be people who hate you for doing it, and just as that is true, no matter what your heroes do, there are going to be people who hate them, and actively resist them for doing it.

And a lot of them are going to think they're justified, that they're doing something good and worthwhile. A lot of them, of course, are just going to be happy that they're causing trouble, because unfortunately there are a lot of folks on the planet like that, too.

When To Use External Conflict

External conflict, for all the wonders it can offer, is NOT the Swiss Army knife of writing. **It has one good basic use, and that is to create a situation in which interpersonal conflicts can flourish.**

External conflict is what established what's at stake in your story. It can be something huge, or it can be something small, and it doesn't really matter which one. All it does is create the situation that bands some of your characters together and pits them against other characters. But the external conflict is only superficially what your story is about.

Your whole story cannot be about the asteroid falling, because frankly, who cares? If an asteroid falls and wipes out a billion people we will never know, then we feel sad, but we go on with our lives.

The asteroid tore through space, aimed at the soft blue planet before it, unstoppable and deadly. When it hit, one billion people would die.

Do you care? I don't care. One billion is an inhuman, faceless number. It is meaningless zeroes. It is worthless, from the perspective of the fiction writer.

If an asteroid threatens your mom, your dad, your best friend, your hometown, your girlfriend, your favorite cat, the dog who has been your boon companion for five years, and you... well, then you care. And the story will be about what you and the people you love, and hate, do about what is happening around them.

In Hankersville, Wyoming, Bob and Kate Mathison washed their car, horsing around in the hot summer sun, spraying each other with the hose, squirting their dog Howard every time he begged for water.

Kate was finally at the stage of her pregnancy where she was over the morning sickness, but not so huge she couldn't move, and every time Bob looked at her, he couldn't believe they were going to have a kid together, they were finally, after so much hardship and yearning and trying and failing, going to be a little family. It was all real, all happening, and right at that moment, listening to her laugh when he sprayed her with the water, watching the sunlight sparkling in the drops beaded on her skin, he was pretty sure he was the luckiest guy alive.

Overhead, an asteroid tore through space, aimed at the soft blue planet before it, unstoppable and deadly. When it hit, one billion people would die. It was going to impact in Hankersville.

Now maybe you care.

No matter how big the disaster you have planned, no matter how much havoc you will wreak, it will mean nothing to your readers if you have not personalized it. You have to **take your disaster home to them**, you have to **give them characters that feel like their best friends (and their worst enemies)**, you have to make your readers ache, all the way to their gut and their bones and their hearts, with the certainty that if that asteroid falls, everything they have come to love is going to die.

And this is just as true for small-stakes stories (that crack in the foundation, that car stalled on the interstate) as it is for big-stakes, end-of-the-world, massive heroic conquest stories. Even if you don't have a life-or-death situation, even if you are telling a funny story about Kate and Bob and the real estate agent who knowingly sold them a house with a cracked foundation (I have no clue how you would actually make this funny, but go with me here), the story cannot be about the cracked foundation. It can only be about Kate and Bob, and what they do about the cracked foundation.

The only way to tell a story with external conflict is to write it about the handful of people who are taking action either for or against that conflict—people who matter to the reader.

(If you're not sure how to make your characters matter to your readers, pick up a copy of *Holly Lisle's Create A Character Clinic* <http://novelwritingschool.com/recommends/character-clinic>. That's what it will teach you.)

Can you have more than one external conflict in a story? Of course. In **Talyn**, my external conflicts were the endless stupid war between the Tonk and the Eastils of Hyre (my main conflict), the desire of the Feegash to force peace on Hyre (my second main conflict), conflicts between the nomadic Tonk and the Tonk that had moved into towns (a subtheme conflict), and a bigger conflict between various factions of the Tonk religion (another subtheme conflict). Plus several more, including the way magic was used. And all of those, just to tell a story about a Tonk woman who fell in love with two men, one Feegash, and one Eastil.

The book is 230,000 words long, and its many external conflicts keep readers guessing, and keep characters uncertain about which action they can take. I don't let anything be simple in it, and using multiple external conflicts is how I did it.

You not only can have multiple external conflicts in a book, but if you do, (and you can hang on to them all), you'll end up with a whole lot of story to tell. The email I get on **Talyn** is almost always that the readers wanted the book to keep going (though one woman did tell me she got Talyn's Tonk clan tattoo on her back.)

EXERCISE: External Conflict

We'll be quick here. Pick an outside event—any outside event. Small, big, silly, grim—we don't care.

- Write a hundred words (or five minutes) on what that outside event is. This isn't a scene. External conflict will not generate scenes. It will generate stories.
- When you have your external conflict, write for ten minutes about two characters, one on each side of your external conflict. Someone who's working to fix the problem, someone who's working to make the problem worse.

When you're done, you've finished your introduction to conflict. You aren't done with conflict, of course, because you cannot have a scene without it. But you now know the five types, and how and when to use them.

Storytelling

All right. You know what the story you want to tell is going to be about. (What? You don't? Go back and do the Storytelling exercise on page 16.) And you understand the different kinds of conflict you can use, and where they best fit into a story.

Your job here is to figure out what is important in your story, and what isn't.

This process will be aided hugely by you knowing how to put together plot cards and a plot outline. If you already have **Plot Clinic** (<http://novelwritingschool.com/recommends/plot-clinic>), you're good to go. If not, and you're not ready to spend more money (I understand this, believe me), I have a couple of free resources on my site that that will get you started. They are:

- Notecarding: Plotting Under Pressure (web page) http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/notecard_plotting.html
- Create A Professional Plot Outline (free ebook and 7 week of PDF lessons) <http://novelwritingschool.com/free-plot>

Use any of these three options, and write out a handful of scene ideas for your story.

Picking Good Scenes

For my story, I'll go with Kate and Bob and the difficult pregnancy and the falling asteroid, and Howard, the dog.

I'll decide to do the story as a two-POV potboiler, with half the book written from Kate's POV, and half from Bob's.

Now I'm going to put together a list of good and bad scene ideas, and you're going to go through and pick out the winners and the losers.

- Bob and Kate wash the car, and hear news of the asteroid heading toward earth over the radio
- They try to find out where the asteroid will hit, but no one knows
- Kate thinks about the baby she's going to have, and how much she and Bob wanted it
- The government calls together a panel of experts to find a solution
- Kate and Bob hear the first reports that it will probably impact in North America, but no one can be sure. They look into getting passports, but discover that the waiting list has soared to more than a year. They apply anyway, but odds are they're stuck in the US
- Bob figures out a way to save Kate and the baby, but it would mean he would have to stay behind. Kate refuses to leave him
- They try to figure out how to sneak across a border. They like their odds with Canada better than Mexico
- The panel of experts can find no solution. They start disappearing as they flee for safer climes
- Kate and Bob scramble to get money for their escape
- Bob makes contact with a guy who says he can get them to China, and Kate freaks out about ending up there with no papers.
- Bottom falls out of the US economy
- People begin panicking as the level of confidence on the impact area rises, and looks more and more like the northeastern Pacific Ocean or the western US

- Bob and Kate decide to make their run for Canada right away
- They are caught trying to cross the border and jailed separately
- Violent rioting in the big cities
- They have the money they put together for their run; they pay their fines just so they can be together. They're in the last days, and most places money is worthless, but the people running the jail don't want to be tied to it anymore, so they accept the essentially worthless paper just to stop having to feed their prisoners
- Bob and Kate and Howard the dog return home to Hanksville, and Kate has the baby a few weeks early
- They watch the sunrise, and the asteroid that they can clearly see, knowing this morning will be their last

Right off the bat, let me say that I HATE this story. I would never write it. I just started throwing ideas on the page, and apparently something triggered my Grim Gene, and...Bleh!

On the bright side, there's a lot to fix.

First, you have to pick out the best scenes (and I use that term loosely) from the list above.

You need three criteria to pick winners.

- The scene has to involve characters we care about.
- The scene has to contain conflict.
- The scene has to move the story forward.

You use the same criteria to recognize complete losers, and to identify scenes that **could** be useful if they were fixed.

EXERCISE: Picking Good Scenes

Go to the list above, and check each scene for characters you care about, conflict, and forward motion.

If the scene will work as written, write a 1 in the box beside it. If it contains elements that make it seem useful if fixed, give it a 2. If its just plain bad, give it a three.

When you've numbered your scenes (and NOT before), turn to the next page.

Okay. Here's the way I've marked the scenes, as well as my reason why.

- Bob and Kate wash the car, and hear news of the asteroid heading toward earth over the radio
1—Has our characters, presents a problem which creates external conflict, moves the story forward (scene goes from happy to tense, characters go from blissful to worried)
- They try to find out where the asteroid will hit, but no one knows
2—Characters are engaged in an action designed to determine their individual risk (scene meets criteria 1 and 2), but is weak in criteria 3 (they start confused and worried, they end confused and worried. Something needs to CHANGE. If Bob discovers something potentially bad and hides it from Kate because he doesn't want to frighten her, THEN, we have a scene.
- Kate thinks about the baby she's going to have, and how much she and Bob wanted it
3—No action, no change, just internal moping and self-pity that are going to make the readers like Kate less. And in my case at least, make the writer like her less, too. I need to replace this with a scene where Kate is scared, is worrying about the baby, but is still DOING SOMETHING to try to better her situation. Or at very least, she's giving that rambunctious hound Howard a bath.
- The government calls together a panel of experts to find a solution

3—This is one of those things that feels like a scene when you write it on an index card, but is pretty useless. This isn't going to be a story about How Big Government Saves Everyone. The story doesn't have any government-employee characters, readers in general are not inclined to like the government's response to big disasters, and if someone said the asteroid was heading straight for the Congressional Building, a significant voting contingent would be praying and/or sticking pins in voodoo dolls that it would hit during a mandatory floor vote with a roll call and lots of reporters present, just to make sure it didn't miss anyone important. In this story, the Big Government Is Going to Save Us thread is going to have to be played out in radio and television snippets as background noise to the actions of our characters

- Kate and Bob hear the first reports that it will probably impact in North America, but no one can be sure. They look into getting passports, but discover that the waiting list has soared to more than a year. They apply anyway, but odds are they're stuck in the US

1—This works for me.

- Bob figures out a way to save Kate and the baby, but it would mean he would have to stay behind. Kate refuses to leave him

2—The problem with this is that it's an idea, not a scene. The note does not say what the idea is. Writing along on the story, you think you'll get it when you get to it, but having done this to myself a ton of times, I can tell you this plot card is a massive headache waiting to happen. If I actually write down Bob's idea, this will then be a scene with everything I need.

- They try to figure out how to sneak across a border. They like their odds with Canada better than Mexico

1—This isn't great, but it does suggest to me a young couple poring over maps at the kitchen table late at night, talking in whispers, holding each other's hands, pitching ideas that combine hopefulness and dread.

- The panel of experts can find no solution. They start disappearing as they flee for safer climes

3—This is another news-overheard-in-the-background item, not a scene.

- Kate and Bob scramble to get money for their escape

2—How? Kate and Bob raid their bank account? Kate and Bob hold up the local Convenient Kwikiee? Kate and Bob beg on the streets? This needs more work before you can move on to the writing it phase.

- Bob makes contact with a guy who says he can get them to China, and Kate freaks out about ending up there with no papers.

3 (maybe 2 with a rewrite of everything else)—This scene has no support elsewhere in the story. The guy with the China connection comes out of nowhere and returns to nowhere, so character is a problem. This scene does not move the story forward—Kate and Bob aren't going to China at the start of the scene, and they aren't going to China at the end of it, and nowhere else in the story is it even an issue. The conflict IN the scene is pointless because nothing will come of this. If you wanted to follow up on the China subplot, you'd have to add in bumping into "the guy" earlier in the story, and they would have to decide the China trip was a good idea, and try it, and have it fail. (Or go to China.)

- Bottom falls out of the US economy

3—As written—no character, no conflict, no forward motion, OR...

3—News at eleven, a little mention in the background of some other scene, OR...

2—If you actually rewrite this to tie in paper money being suddenly worthless with Kate and Bob's situation in Hanksville, and have them not able to buy food, or afford gas for their car, or whatever, then it could be a scene that stands on its own.

- People begin panicking as the level of confidence on the impact area rises, and looks more and more like the

northeastern Pacific Ocean or the western US

2—Another snippet in a real scene. Not a scene on its own.

- Bob and Kate decide to make their run for Canada right away

1—Has our characters, conflict, and forward motion. This can stay.

- They are caught trying to cross the border and jailed separately

1—This can stand as is. You roll into your office first thing on Monday morning and this is the scene waiting for you, you'll be able to start writing right away.

- Violent rioting in the big cities

3—This is another news clip.

- They have the money they put together for their run; they pay their fines just so they can be together. They're in the last days, and most places money is worthless, but the people running the jail don't want to be tied to it anymore, so they accept the essentially worthless paper just to stop having to feed their prisoners

2—The story developed more things about the worthlessness of money (or maybe it didn't, depending on how you decided to roll on that. Either way, though, this has the elements of a scene, but needs to be rewritten in one-line form to fit the current story

- Bob and Kate and Howard the dog return home to Hanksville, and Kate has the baby a few weeks early

1—It has characters, conflict, and forward motion, and that will work beautifully.

- They watch the sunrise, and the asteroid that they can clearly see, knowing this morning will be their last

3—Shoot me, shoot me now. We've spent a hundred thousand or so words with these folks, and the best we can do is to stand there with them, all weepy, on the last day of their lives? That's what this book is ABOUT?

In all fairness, there is a certain readership for people who write books like this. The writers are almost always men, the readers are almost always women, and the outcome is almost always heartbreaking, stupid, hopeless tragedy. Nicholas Sparks, God Incarnate of the Female Weeper, has set up camp in this genre and makes a buttload of money from it.

Personally, I'd rather chew off my own fingertips than write the stuff, and yeah, I'm actually naming names of an author whose work I hate. Why am I being so mean?

1. I'm not going to hurt his sales by doing it. I am a bug in his universe.
2. He writes in a hugely profitable genre and if the outline I presented above was at ALL attractive to you, you have the right to know that it is (with the revisions I've suggested and a bunch of others I haven't) probably workable **because** of that miserable tragic "everyone-we-love-dies" ending.
3. If you hated that outline as much as I did, you have to realize that sometimes when you sit down to plot, your evil, sneaking, conniving, pain-in-the-posterior muse is going to merrily toss things like that at you. And you will know you *could* do something with those awful ideas, and that the something you did *might*, in fact, sell...

...And you have to have the courage of your convictions to know that you would not write THAT book if someone offered you a ton of money for it, because **dire consequences might ensue**.

All joking aside, some ideas you get will always be bad ideas. And some of them will be good, or even great, ideas that *will be nonetheless bad for you*.

You might fail with an idea that is bad for you, of course, **but the dire consequence is that you might succeed**.

It Ain't The Money, Honey (A Digression)

Realize that if you decide to pursue an idea just for the money, and the book that results goes big for you, you are stuck coming up with more ideas and writing more books in that genre because that is what publishers will associate with you. If you hit big in a genre you hate, you have three options:

1. Write and be miserable.
2. Change your name and start over.
3. Go out and get a Real Job™.
4. What you're thinking of as **Secret Option Number Four**—using your sudden fame to write something you like—**is not an option** because there are no numbers for the thing you like, and lots and lots of good numbers for the thing you hate. **Your sudden fame is meaningless to publishers.** Your sudden fame as a Writer of Female Weepies, and *your ability to write more of the same*, is what publishers care about.

Someone is saying, “I don't care. If it makes me money, I'll laugh all the way to the bank.” I can hear you from here.

So all right. I'll say more on this.

I wrote one project just for the money. Hardest, most miserable money I ever made. (It's almost certainly not a book you've heard of. It was work for hire, it was in a series with a lot of other authors, and I did the best I could with it at the time. But...bleh.)

Fortunately, it wasn't my project, and it wasn't particularly successful. Here's a story with a sadder ending.

I know one SF writer who hit big with a fantasy comedy. It was the thing that did really well for him, and he hated the book, hated the readers for being so stupid that they liked that crap (his words, not mine), hated the fact that *fantasy comedy* was the thing that had done well for him, because he hated fantasy, he hated comedy, and he'd just done it because Robert Asprin and Piers Anthony were at the time raking in the dough with fantasy comedies. If you know this guy's name at all, odds are really good that you know him for that series, on which he toiled for about ten books. When I talked to him at a con one year, he was one miserable dude. He's doing work-for-hire now.

So (yes, this is a huge digression from writing scenes, and into just writing professionally, but what the hell—we'll get back to scenes in a moment), for those of you who think the money will make everything okay, I want you to do a little math with me. **This is not money math. This is “This Is Your Life” math.**

- One book is roughly a hundred thousand words.
- If you average 250 words in ten minutes (about my average) in first draft, that's 1500 words an hour. Please note that this is **67 honest-to-God no-messing-around, no-answering-emails, no-surfing-the-web work hours.** (And you're thinking *That doesn't seem like so much.*)

It is. **When you're a writing, you're on your own time.** You do not get paid for casual trips to the water cooler, stopping at a friend's cubicle to discuss the meeting, *going* to a meeting, looking out the window, bathroom breaks, lunch breaks, taking a minute to snack at your desk, quick peeks at your email, or procrastinating visits to the weblogs you read online. You do not get paid while you clean your office, sharpen pencils, or daydream about the past weekend or the next on. You have no boss; you have no time clock; you have no salary; you have no backup; you have nothing but you and words you have not yet written standing between you and homelessness.

You are only making money to live on when you are actively involved in one of these four activities: **story development, story writing, story editing, and story submission.**

Period.

Furthermore, that 67 hours is: A) best case, B) only the minutes where your fingers are actually typing words, and C) do not include a single instant where you so much as look out the window to stop and think. I average one and a half hours of pure writing a day unless I'm up against the wall on a deadline.

- One and a half hard-work hours a day times 67 hours rounds out to 45 days. So best case, figure **you're going to spend 45 work days writing the first draft.**
- Then there's your revision. I only do one before I send the book to my editor, but your mileage may vary, (and it will probably vary to the long side of the time I need, because I've been doing this for a long time, I know my system, and I'm good at it). However, since I know how long it takes me to do things, we're going to use me as an example. And I'm going to give you my shiny happy best-case numbers, knowing that most books are bad-case- or worst-case-scenario generators. So:
 1. **One work week, four hours a day, for the read-through** of the first draft, the note-taking and putting everything onto revision plot cards (see **Plot Clinic** for complete details), and problem identification. **20 hours** of your-fingers-are-moving genuine work.
 2. **Two work weeks, four hours a day (if things are going well) for the handwritten edits** scribbled onto a printed version of the manuscript—the write in. **40 hours.**
 3. **One work week of eight-hour days**—generally with no respite but bathroom breaks and the food your terrified family tosses at you from the door before they flee—**for the type-in** (by this time I'm always up against my deadline, and I'm working in a white heat, and stressed to my limit). **40 hours.**

Yes, 40 hours is definitely a best-case scenario. Frequently during type-in, I end up working fourteen- or sixteen-hour days. And still working more than one work week. And throwing in a weekend or two if necessary.

- Then there's the editor's revision. Or revisions. The copyeditor's revision. The proofreading revision. These take as long as they take, and generally each editor's revision takes a couple of weeks and about 30-60 hours, and each copyeditor's revision takes about a week (20 hours, but this can be SO much worse in some cases), and each proofing revision takes about 10 hours. Always, always, focused hours, not fooling around hours.

Minimum hours of your life that you're going to put into each book—using the lowest number, the number where every story element broke your way and everything went right and the world was a sunny, happy place—**227 hours** of real, focused, attentive work. **Minimum.**

We will not talk about **maximum** hours. **There are no maximum hours.** Some writers wreck their lives on the reef of one impossible book, and never get past it. You are not them, that is not your goal. You are a working writer, and **working writers finish projects and move on.**

But look at the choice between sinking 227 hours of your work and focused concentration and best effort and your actual life (time you cannot get back) into a genre you hate, for stories you hate, with characters you despise, written for readers you despise—instead of doing it for stories you love passionately.

Then imagine writing not one, but five or ten books you hate, because you succeeded and now that genre and series is all publishers will buy from you.

If you only pursue projects you genuinely love (or at least like), you'll never get stuck writing things you hate.

That's my rant. Before you think you'll be happy writing crap you hate if you make a lot of money at it, do the math with your numbers, and look at its real cost to your life.

If it still looks worth it to you, then go for it, and I'll shut up.

And good luck with that.

More Storytelling

Now you know how to recognize what will be a workable scene after only writing one or two sentences about it, and you know what to look for when deciding which scenes to use as-is, which scenes to fix, and which scenes to toss, or use as minor bits of background in real scenes.

BUT...

- What if you have a whole bunch of ideas for the same scene, and you don't know which one would be best?
- What if you want to spread out your action and worldbuilding and surprises across a bunch of scenes?
- What if you've put your hero into hot water, and now you don't know how to get him back out?

Too Many Ideas

What if you have a whole bunch of ideas for the same scene, and you don't know which one would be best?

First, you eliminate all the bad ideas, and fix all the fixable ideas, as we did above. But after you've done that, if you have a number of scenes fighting for the same place in the story, you use the method below to find the one scene that will actually work.

Let's go back to my horrible outline above, and revisit the Trip To China scene, and the fleeing to escape to Canada or Mexico scene. And let's pretend two things.

- First, that I did what I was supposed to do with this story and wrote out what I wanted it to be about BEFORE I threw down a bunch of scenes in line-per-scene form. (See **Exercise: Your Story As You Imagine It** on page 17)
- And second, that those two scenes were actually alternatives for one scene in which my young pair would be planning their future.

Here's what you look for.

- Your theme: In this case, “In case of inescapable death, hold hands and cry.”
- What your story is about: In this case, “Young couple expecting first child fight to escape path of oncoming asteroid.”

Those were written cynically, and after I'd discovered what a cruel trick my subconscious self (my muse) had played on me by handing me *that* idea. However, both the theme and the 25-words-or-less story summary allow us to quickly eliminate the China option scene and keep the Canada/Mexico option.

Why? Because the China option might actually succeed in getting our characters out of the way of the oncoming asteroid. If you're writing a potboiler tearjerker where the mandatory outcome for the characters is failure to achieve their goals or effect meaningful change, followed by your closing moments being dying in as pitiful a fashion as possible, you must keep them on the continent.

EXERCISE: Too Many Ideas

- Go through your list of planned scenes, and look at them with a critical, harsh—even fishy—eye. Be suspicious of their motives for trying to find a place in your story. When you know what you plan your story to be about, you can see some of your scenes are actually going to help you tell that story, while some of them are pretending to be good scenes but will actually take you way out of your way, dumping you and your book without passport and papers, or any other way to get back, in China.
- DELETE (do not just save for reuse) all such scenes.

Saving Good Stuff for Later

We've worked on this to some degree, simply by the process of setting up your scenes with one-line descriptions and requiring that you have a change in the scene. However, sometimes it is still going to be entirely too easy to give everything away in the first scene in which you bring in something critical to your story.

Here are a couple of places where it's easy to run into trouble:

- Introducing a character who is a bad guy, and whom you need to have remain a mystery until about the midpoint of the book—except you demonstrate to everyone that he's a skunk the first time you bring him onstage.
- Writing down some bit of background in your first chapter that ends up totally blowing the surprise you had planned for the end
- Showing the gun and shooting the gun in the same scene—never good.

The fix for this is easy. (And isn't that nice to hear?) Let's call it the Mislend the Reader Two-Step.

1. You write down the key elements of the thing you want to hide.
2. You split them up.

And that's it.

Here are the elements I'd need to hide with a serial killer villain.

- He has adapted one of his two cars to be inescapable for passengers.
- He specializes in killing girls with long, dark hair.
- He presents himself as helpless and charming.
- He has a torture chamber set up in his house.
- He keeps souvenirs of his kills.
- He has a regular (redheaded) girlfriend who has no idea about his other life.

If I want to hide the fact that my villain is the villain, here's what I do.

1. Introduce the villain in a setting where he is likable, lovable, helpful, intelligent in a friendly way, (not in a “man, I want to strangle that know-it-all” way) or sexy.
2. Put him into situations where he can gain access to the people or things he craves while not arousing suspicion.
3. Give him a job that confers respectability.
4. Make him attractive. Fun. Funny.
5. And then, one item at a time, I'd start introducing discordances.
 - a. His girlfriend would find a necklace that wasn't hers on the floor of his closet.
 - b. He'd miss a day of work, and come in all scratched and bruised with a funny story about a camping accident.
 - c. He'd try to pick up a girl, she'd get freaked and run away, and give the police a good first description of him and his second car.
 - d. He'd go absolutely insane when his girlfriend clogged the drain and called a plumber (on her dime) to fix it, and the two of them would split up. (He blew up because something under the house is bleeding...)

- e. And so on, intercutting his changes and gradual disintegration with changes in other characters who are actual suspects (though innocent), until at last I could have him grab someone, drag her off, and have a hair-raising life-or-death chase to get to him before he killed her.

I'd do the same thing with background I wanted to keep hidden.

Secrets of the Temple of Ick

- The Temple of Ick is haunted.
- It was the site of Gungan sacrifices during the Swamp Fever Epoch. (Go Gungan sacrifice!)
- It has a room in the center that devours the souls of those who remain within it.

How do you avoid starting with an expository lump that goes:

Long ago, when the Gungans ruled the swamps, priests of the Matta people built great temples to destroy them, for the Gungans were hideously cute, long-eared, and spoke in stupidly grating tones. In these temples, Mattans slaughtered their enemies wholesale (or retail when necessary), and fed their souls to the Soul Chamber housed in the very heart of the temple, right next to the latrines.

Three different ways, all of them involving action, movement, and immediacy.

The first is with dialogue:

“Oh, Jim, look at this cool old ruin I just found. Look at the way the late afternoon sun shines on the white stone. Take a picture of me in front of it, will you? ... What? There's a door?”

If the temple is a huge character in your story, introduce it in an innocent setting by throwing characters at it who DO NOT KNOW what it is, what it was, or what it contains.

The second is with action:

They leapt across the stream to get away from the howler monkeys, and Jim tripped over a root and fell against vines that covered what looked like carved stone. “Missy!” he shouted. “Get over here!”

The third is with description, but ACTIVE description—something happening not in the distant past, but in the story's here and now.

It might have been a vine—was thick enough to have been an ancient one, too—but it slithered across the surface of white, cold stone. Missy, who had been watching Jim swinging a machete, hacking a path through the endless underbrush, and who had been about to put her hand on that ‘vine’ to steady herself, looked sharply at the python moving past and shuddered.

And then she saw the glyph on the stone beneath it.

EXERCISE: Saving Good Stuff For Later

- Explore the most important parts of the story you have planned, whether these parts are characters, settings, or actions.
- Carefully break down each item you want to hide and gradually reveal these items as separate facts spread out over the course of your story.
- Write down a list of subterfuges you can create so that the reader will start out with the wrong idea. Do this without lying, which is bad. Never lie to the reader. Simply keep him focused on looking in wrong directions, and keep a series of likely distractions in front of him until the last possible moment.

Getting Out of Nasty Corners

You've painted your character into a corner, and you've done a really great, bang-up job of it. He can't figure out how to

get himself out, you can't figure out how to get him out, and you've stopped writing, lest you put three more words on the page and inadvertently kill him. Hey, it happens.

It happened to me in THE SECRET TEXTS trilogy, where I had my hero and heroine reached the very end of the last book, only to discover that they had to die. I'd written 360,000 words and three books to get to that point, in a series with as much struggle and pain and suffering toward important ends as I could write, and at the end of that, I found myself staring at the two people who had struggled the hardest, who had won their way to each other, who had the most to live for—and they were toast.

That was it. They were headed for the best, the most heroic, the noblest ending I could think of, and I hated it beyond words...but there they were, already in the chute, so to speak, tearing toward their inevitable destruction with no way out, and anything I could think of that would save them would be cheating, and I just had to stop writing.

I asked myself—did I have to kill them? Yes. Their deaths were the sacrifice that would save a world. If they lived, the world died. You can't get more cut and dried than that.

Could someone leap in and save them? Not so much. They couldn't wimp out at the end and let someone else go mop up. That's not what heroes do. Besides, I'd set up the story so they and their abilities with magic could travel between the worlds—where the bad things waited—and so they were fairly unique in this ability. There was one other capable person, but he was the one who had sent them on their one-way trip into oblivion in the first place, so no use looking for help there.

I was, oh, so very unhappy.

I started tearing the ending apart critically, looking for a way out that wasn't cheating, that wasn't going to weaken the story, and that wasn't going to kill my two main characters.

I asked myself these questions:

- **What?**

1. What part of the action could only my heroes do?
2. What parts could be played by another character or characters?
3. What **importance** did their deaths have in their battle with the final villain?
4. What might they do instead if they survived?

- **Who?**

1. Who else's death might play the same role as the heroes' and have the same importance?
2. Who were the other players in the scene, and what were their relationships to each other?

- **How?**

1. How could I split the actions that had to be taken in the scene so my heroes could do the things **ONLY** they could do, while other characters could take over the dying part?

- **Why?**

1. Why were each of my characters doing what they were doing. What was their **REASON WHY**?

I discovered the following pieces of information.

- My heroes had to step between the worlds knowing they were going to die—that they could not win unless they did—and they had to go through voluntarily.

- *Their knowledge that they were choosing to make this sacrifice, and their decision to volunteer anyway, were my keys—the two critical things only my heroes could bring to the table.*
- *Why their knowledge was important was the thing I picked at until I solved my problem.*

I kept asking questions.

- Who will know they know?
- How will someone or something else knowing that the heroes know their deaths are inevitable change that other person's or things actions?
- Who will know they volunteered?
- How will knowing they were willingly sacrificing their own lives affect others involved in that climactic scene?

My solution came when I recognized that their knowledge of their certain deaths, and **the villain's knowledge of their knowledge**, would cause the villain to make certain assumptions. My capable third party knew the nature of the villain, and understood how what he knew could be exploited. From those two essential pieces of information, discovered by asking questions, I found the key that let me save my heroes without cheating.

The ending to the series is one of the best endings I've ever written. It is a triumphant conclusion to 360,000 very gritty, tense words of fiction, and I got to it by taking the necessary steps to create alternatives for myself...and by asking questions one after another after another until one of those alternatives worked.

Here, broken down, are the step you take:

- **First, remember every question you ask yourself about a story centers around creating change.** When you ask, you're looking for dominoes falling in directions you had not previously explored.
- **Second, ask yourself questions** that begin with Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How.
- **Third, take the time to figure out the critical action in the scene, and split out the parts ONLY your hero (or villain) can do from parts that could be done by others.** At very least, you want to avoid weakening the impact of the scene. At best, you want your answer to make the scene even stronger.
- **You do that by, fourth, figuring out THE REASON WHY.** In fiction, **the reason why** things happen is your best friend, if you will only remember to pay attention to it and never, ever, forget that it has to be addressed in the story at all times.

“I have a scene with pirates with swords in sailing ships fighting a military unit with submachine guns, and the pirates are my heroes and need to win.”

Why are your under-teched pirates fighting a modern military unit? I grant you, this is going to be a **how** problem of the first magnitude, too, but **why** does your world support windjammers and automatic weapons made with high-grade processed ore and high-quality metal machining.

(I'll note that Harry Turtledove did something like this brilliantly in *Guns of the South*, while other authors have made horrible messes of the same concept. The primary difference between success and failure was THE REASON WHY. Turtledove had a brilliant reason why involving time travel, Southern rebels, and old scores to be settled. In the books that failed, the authors didn't go beyond, “Ooh, ooh, wouldn't it be cool if I could toss modern technology in with ancient technology and have it all just exist together?”)

“My Vikings have just hit the Americas and have been taken captive by the Chinese, who colonized it centuries ago.”

Why? Why did a people who were isolationist by culture and religion go out exploring and conquering in your world? In spite of massive population pressures and knowledge that there were huge riches beyond their borders, they didn't build empires in the Americas in our world. What changed them in yours?

“I have this scene where my computer guys are vampires who use mystic spells to get their computers to work, and the business guys want them to do more work in less time for lower pay and threaten the coders with silver stakes and garlic.”

Knowing a fair number of computer guys, I'm inclined to think this is the secret truth behind computer programming anyway, but let's pretend it isn't. Why is magic necessary for the operation of simple physics? And why is vampirism necessary for the sustained existence of programmers and coders?

In every case, if you can find THE REASON WHY—not just why it *is* that way, but why it *has to be* that way, you'll figure out how to get your characters out of their corners. If you can't come up with a compelling reason, (and the Mom Reason, “Because I said so,” won't work this time) it's time to rethink the scenario into something for which you **can** come up with a working REASON WHY.

- **Finally, fifth, you must refit the story around the changes you need to make.** In *Courage of Falcons*, I had to write a couple of short scenes earlier in the book in order to make my change work. Odds are good you'll need to do the same thing.

EXERCISE: Getting Out of Nasty Corners

Ideally, you want to avoid landing in nasty corners in the first place. So right now, look at the story you're working on, and figure out where you're most likely to get stuck (either in a big scene in the middle or the big scene at the end). Answer the following questions:

- **Where** are my main characters going?
- **What** are they doing?
- **How** are they accomplishing it?
- **Why** are they involved?
- **Who** else can be involved?
- **When** can I bring in trouble?
- **What is my REASON WHY for the whole situation?**
- **How** can I split up the action they have to carry out among them and other **important** characters? **They have to be important characters.** The *Star Trek* redshirts who die are a painful joke—they are born-to-die characters, and in almost all cases, their deaths are meaningless to the viewer. **Character deaths, character failures, and character losses need to mean something.**
- **What** am I going to need to move, to change, to add in earlier, and remove or rewrite to make this scene work better?

Pacing

I got more questions about pacing than anything else when I asked what you needed to know about scenes, and I've spent a great deal of time answering those questions as parts of the critical issues of conflict and storytelling. Quite simply, **if you focus on conflict and storytelling, pacing takes care of itself.** Your scenes will be as long as they need to be; you'll have a good balance of exposition; dialogue, and action; they'll be interesting; your internal conflict scenes will not consist exclusively of internal dialogue, and so on.

However, I frequently get three questions about pacing that I need to address in this section.

- **Is skipping over the boring parts okay?**
- **How do I give the reader a breather between very heavy action scenes?**
- **How do I keep the pages turning when the stakes aren't life or death?**

We'll do them in order. Onward, then.

Skipping Over The Boring Parts

So here's the question: Is skipping over the boring parts okay?

Yes. Skipping over the boring parts is your job. You as the writer are your story's filter. You decide which parts are compelling and fascinating, which will move the story forward, and which will leave your readers breathless. There is no such thing as a necessary boring part.

I'm going to repeat that.

There is no such thing as a necessary boring part.

If whatever you have going on in the boring part is genuinely necessary, then your job is to figure out a way to make it interesting. If it's boring and it's still in there when you send the book off, you have failed your job, your book, and your reader. To make it interesting, you:

- **Insert critical conflict.**
- **Add action.**
- **Move the story forward—figure out what changes, and then change it.**
- **Put something at risk.**

If nothing you do makes the scene interesting, **kill it**, and find another place in the story to get the same information in there. Break it into small bits, give it to different characters, whatever you have to do. Say I look over my manuscript and discover that I have one scene in which I've spewed a huge infodump, and nothing else. Here are Jim and Missy again.

“What I find interesting is the way the Temple of Ick is aligned with the sun. Did you notice that in the morning, the sun shone through the top of the temple cupola across those standing stones behind us?” Jim asked.

“I did,” Missy agreed. “From everything I've studied about the Los Ickians, they used the sun not just to figure out planting times and track seasons, but also to determine lucky and unlucky dates for their human sacrifices.”

“Exactly,” Jim said. “And they carved special glyphs on their standing stones, all of which I find still in remarkable condition considering how long they've been here, considering that each of the glyphs is still readable. Note the glyph for Monkey Singing on the first primary standing stone, and the glyph for Rabbit Sulking on the second. By the time you get around to the thirtieth primary standing stone you're looking at Razorback Hog Dancing The Tango, which is certainly the unluckiest of the glyphs—from the point of the waiting sacrifices, in any case.”

While it is bad, this didn't turn out to be quite as pointless a scene as I'd hoped for, because while I was writing it, I

realized that Jim could recognize that the glyph upon which the sun had fallen that morning was one of the Good Days For Killing People glyphs, which meant if the temple were still working, the rays of the sun would have activated the soul-eating room at its heart, and if he could just drag Missy down there, he could send her to a quick and terrible end without leaving any sign that she'd ever existed. How's that for convoluted thinking?

However, from the reader's perspective, it's bad. It's horribly expository, nothing happens, and we're thinking *Who cares about this?* as we read it.

To save the scene, we have to find what's worth keeping. First off, none of the writing is worth keeping. All you have there is one dreadful "As You Know, Bob" (Create A Character Clinic has all the details of the "As You Know, Bob")

However, the info about the sun illuminating the Razorback Hog Dancing The Tango glyph could be worked into quick description at a point where the couple is clearing the brush, because that's important. Having both of them conversant in the complete archeological history of the place is lame. Having Jim know about it, though, makes some sense if he already knew the temple was there and something about it. So in the same scene, we could have him take the time to trace out the glyph with a finger, realize what it means, and give the temple a knowing look. Maybe hurry Missy along in brush clearing so they can get into the temple before the Ten Days of Razorback Hog have passed and the room shuts down.

EXERCISE: Skipping Over The Boring Parts

Identify the boring parts in the following fashion: Ask yourself, *Am I bored writing this?* Or, if you know you're someone who could write 200,000 words of **The Life and Times of A Crystal Of Salt on My Table**, including daily entries for the six months while it sits there unchanged, sacrifice a friend on the altar of necessity, and have her read it and see if she passes out, falls asleep, or plasters a fixed smile on her face when she's finished and says, "That was...*interesting*," with audible strain in her voice. Failure to make eye contact while saying "interesting" is a blaring klaxon of a warning sign, too.

- Take one of your boring parts.
- Identify the elements in it that are critical for your story.
- Test each critical element. Does it contribute to moving the story forward, either by:
 1. **Adding information that will lead to the story's conclusion,**
 2. **Or by developing an essential part of your character,**
 3. **Or by inserting critical conflict?**
- Write each critical element of your bad scene down on a separate sheet of paper, and brainstorm ideas on how you can work each element back into the story. Refer to **Conflict** and **Storytelling** for ideas.
- Write a new scene or several, depending on what you came up with.

Breathers

Here's the question: How do I give the reader a breather between very heavy action scenes?

- First, are you sure you want to? Granted, you'll kill people if you just run them through a novel without ever giving them a chance to slow down, but most stories naturally slip out of the rapids into slow pools from time to time. If your story already has some contemplative spots in it, or some funny bits, or some places where characters have some down time to horse around in front of the campfire, then *don't break up your action sequences out of a sense of obligation. Run them as hard and tense as you can.*

If, however, you've read through your first draft and have discovered you're going to give someone a heart attack if you don't add some breathers, then you can create breathers in scene, or breathers between scenes.

The In-Scene Breather

- **We'll call this one Doing The Hitchcock, after the brilliant movie director Alfred Hitchcock, who perfected the technique.**

To *Do the Hitchcock*, you write a scene in which it looks like terrible things are going to happen. Then you use comedy or farce or another distracting mechanism to downplay the danger and relax the reader. Following that, you pick up tension again by bringing in the expected conflict, but from an unexpected direction.

EXAMPLE:

The door creaks open. The sudden draft blows the candle out. A twisted, distorted, moonlit shadow creeps across the wall. And then, after all that buildup, a cat walks in. The door, the draft, the shadow—all just a cat.

The character laughs at the silliness of his overwrought imagination. The reader laughs at the character's moment of melodrama. And you laugh...well...because you aren't done yet.

Now you drop the villain from the chandelier onto your suddenly unwary victim, and your reader trudges off to find a clean pair of underwear.

EXERCISE: The In-Scene Breather

Doing The Hitchcock works for adding a breather **within** a scene. So find a scene you've written (or write a new scene) where you want to have tremendous suspense, followed by a false sense of security, only to slam the reader with an attack from a completely new direction.

- Study the action you already have.
- Locate your change point—the point where you would logically have the attack by the villain, or the bomb exploding, or the heroine telling the hero that she's pregnant, and the baby is his.
- Insert your diversion:
 1. The cat walks in instead.
 2. The bomb pops open and a little flag springs out, and the flag says, *Ha-Ha! Got you to look!*
 3. The heroine gives her boyfriend the big “we need to talk about our relationship” build-up, and he just knows she's going to tell him she's pregnant, and instead she says, “I got a job offer in Seattle, and I think I want to take it, but I don't want to be without you.”
- Allow your characters to react with appropriate relief, or amusement, or whatever fits the situation. Then...
- Drop your real bomb:
 1. The villain leaps from the chandelier onto his victim—he's been *with her the whole time*.
 2. Your fake bomb launches a second flag that says, “The real bomb is in the sewer under the Westchester Station five miles from here, and it's going to go off in three minutes. Ha-Ha!”
 3. The heroine says, “By the way, I'm pregnant. And the baby is yours.” This works especially brutally if she either got him to commit to going to Seattle with her (under what suddenly looks like false pretenses), or if he acted like an ass about a genuinely good job she had good reason to want, and he is now storming out the door.

The Between-Scenes Breather

What you're looking for here is not a way to take the reader out of one story to spend time in another, but a way to supplement the first story with ongoing but less tense action from a second story. I'll let you know that this is harder to do than it looks, for three reasons.

- Every reader is different, and some like the complexity of multiple storylines, while some don't.
- Every character is different (if they aren't, you need to work on your characters more), and readers will have favorites, which may not be the ones you thought would be their favorites.
- All action is different, and what some readers find thrilling, others will find dull.

I've gotten chastised by some reviewers for the exact same scenes other reviewers loved. So here's a useful point to keep in mind as a writer:

No matter what you do, where readers are concerned, you'll ALWAYS be wrong. Somewhere. With something.

You'll also be right, with the exact same things and for exactly opposite reasons. But nobody ever quits writing because of fan mail and glowing reviews. It's the "this book sucked" e-mails and the "boring, stupid, waste of time" reviews that make you want to pack up your kit bag and go live with the penguins in Antarctica.

Remember what I told you earlier, that **you cannot please everybody, and you must not try?** Here it is again.

This is why you don't write for readers. You write for **Reader. One reader.**

Whether it's your husband or wife, or Mark Twain, or Captain America, or your Aunt Trilby, or some interesting-looking stranger whose picture you've cut out of a magazine and taped to your monitor so you had a face to go with the idea of "reader," you're only trying to please one human being.

I've written for Mark Twain and C.S. Lewis, I've written for myself with the paranormal suspense romances, and lately I write fantasy for my husband because, aside from George R.R. Martin, he hates fantasy...except for mine. He's a hard audience for even me to hit, and I love the challenge of hooking him.

So we've established that writing between-scenes breathers have some built in problems which are unfixable, and which revolve around reader likes and expectations, and all of them will get you some good reviews and some bad reviews, and will win you a few readers and lose you a few others.

You can't fix readers. You can, however, fix the OTHER problems with between-scenes breathers, and that's what we're going to work on here.

- **To create a breather between your main storyline's scenes, you work in an alternating storyline.**

This will either be a secondary problem your main character is dealing with or an issue a secondary character is dealing with. The idea is that you leave one situation right on the edge of disaster, and then you blithely skip off to deal with another set of lesser problems for a bit. Done well, (the secondary issue has to be important—the secondary character has to be someone we care about) you can delay gratification on the main issue, and give the reader a short vacation.

EXAMPLE:

Karen, the reporter heroine of a story we haven't yet explored, is trapped in a warehouse where she has tracked down a Columbian drug-lord's latest shipment of cocaine, and she's being pursued by drug dealers who have just trapped her in a corner office of the warehouse. She has managed to get inside and shove a desk and a couple of filing cabinets up against the door, but the drug dealers are still beating on the office door, the warehouse is still on fire, and Karen is cornered like a rat with no window, no other way out, smoke creeping under the door, and not much time left.

Here's a good alternating storyline.

We cut a new scene, wherein her cop boyfriend, Dan, just got the text message she sent to his cell phone, and is driving like a wild man toward the warehouse, where he spots and calls in the blaze, and then gets into a gunfight with the drug dealers while trying to rescue Karen from the warehouse.

This scene will give readers just a bit of a breather, because now we know help is on the way. But it also keeps

tension high because we know help is having a very difficult time getting where it needs to be.

Done poorly, you're just going to anger your readers for delaying their finding out what they want to know: "What's going to happen next?"

Here's a *bad* alternating storyline.

Instead of cutting from Karen to Dan who is on his way to rescue Karen, we cut from Karen to her younger sister Ellen, who's still in high school, and who is facing final exams, and who has the perfect opportunity to cheat on her trigonometry finals, and must struggle with the moral dilemma of getting a certain A by cheating versus doing the work on her own and getting a probable C.

In another world, this could be a great story. **In this world**, where Karen is still stuck in a burning warehouse being attacked by drug dealers who have to kill her to protect their livelihood and stay out of prison, **nobody cares about math.**

Introducing THE MATH RULE: The question you ask yourself when evaluating possible secondary storylines is: **Is this a world where people care about math?**

Substitute **math** for whatever your big secondary issue is, of course. Realize that no matter how great that second story is, it might not be the right one to supplement your first story.

EXERCISE: The Between-Scenes Breather

- **Write a scene for your first story that ends in a cliffhanger.**
- **Figure out what the following main storyline scene is going to be.** (Karen passes out from smoke inhalation. Karen starts bashing a hole in what she thinks is the outside wall of the warehouse, only to A) hit bricks, B) bash a hole into the room where more drug dealers are carting cocaine brick out into their waiting cars, C) break through to find herself standing over water, in South Florida, where water has alligators in it, and these alligators are close and hungry because Dan shot a drug dealer who fell into the water and whom they're all now tearing bits off of.
- **Create a secondary scene that passes the "math rule."** Write it so that it allows you to get your secondary character where he needs to be to eventually help out your main character, leave him struggling and his fate unknown, and write the next **main storyline scene.**

Less-Than-Life-or-Death Stakes

I get this final question so often: How do I keep the pages turning when the stakes aren't life or death?

This one is the simplest questions of all to answer, but it will require your complete and total focus as a storyteller.

Let's briefly revisit Ellen, Karen's sister with the trigonometry test.

In this new book we're writing, Ellen has her own story, and it isn't just about cheating or not cheating on a trigonometry test. It's about her being a kid from a poor family who is only going to get to go to college if she can win some major scholarships. She wants to be a genetic engineer, she wants to find a cure for cystic fibrosis (because her twin brother died of it at the age of thirteen), she promised herself she would end this thing that killed him, and she wants to do something that really matters with her life.

Now we're in a world where math matters. Whether Ellen cheats or not on the test becomes of huge importance to her—and to us—because a C on a math final will kill her chances of that scholarship, and she knows it, and we know it, and if you've done your job building up to that moment, we want her to succeed. Whereas cheating on the test will make her someone we'll have a harder time caring about, and in her own eyes, she will become—deservedly—someone less than she was before. She will have betrayed her own principles and let herself down.

So how do you get us to that moment where we—presumed math haters and trigonometry non-starters—care about math?

- **YOU care about your characters** and the story you're telling, and you make **us** care by giving us things to care about. If you cannot make yourself care deeply about what happens to your folks, we will feel that lack, and we won't care either.
- **You give us real problems, real struggles, real issues**—and when I say real, I mean real within the context of your world, not real as in “I read this in the paper yesterday.” Terraforming a new planet and coming across pre-existing sentient life is a real problem in the context of a novel about desperate homesteaders in space, even if it isn't one in our world.
- **You take us down to the level of one character we love facing one problem we can identify with**, you take us through it, and you make us suffer and hope and dream and struggle right along with your character. Even if your whole world is at war, we cannot identify with or care about billions. We can only care about the people we know. Give us those few people who live within their times and the struggles of their outside world. Make them individuals, not representatives or stereotypes. We do not need The Cocky Hero, The Smart-Mouthed Heroine, The Goofy Sidekick, The Backstabbing Best Friend, or The Treacherous Villain. We do not need The Cool Black Guy, The Hot Hispanic Girl, The Asian Mathematician, or The Stupid White Guy.

We need Bob, who cares deeply about his wife and kid, and Kate, who loves Bob and their unborn child, and Nigel, the displaced Yorkshire dentist who wants to live to see another day. We need Alisa, who left home at fifteen and is trying to survive as a waitress in a country where she barely speaks the language. We need Jamal, who left gang culture and gangland America to seek out opportunity as an entrepreneur. If you can give us real people, we will care.

- **You hurt the ones we love**, and you make them fight for every tiny victory.

When it comes to your characters, the easy way out is ALWAYS the wrong way. Your characters have to earn their victories and they have to earn our respect by fighting when things are hard. If Alisa wakes up one morning and discovers she suddenly understands English perfectly, you will lose us. If Jamal has people rolling out the red carpet for his entrepreneurial dreams, we will hate him, because no one ever threw money and office space and mentors at us.

Make your characters spend hungry nights wishing they could afford the McDonald's one-dollar menu. Make your rich girl's life empty and lonely, even in the midst of friends and goodies.

There's a song sung by Mary Chapin Carpenter called *The Hard Way*. The lyrics are just about a perfect blueprint for a novel.

<http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/carpenter-mary-chapin/the-hard-way-5189.html>

Read over them and, if you can, listen to the song a few dozen times. Then write characters who get rained on, battered, broken, and betrayed, but who in the end win the day, not by luck, but by never turning back.

- **And when they win, you make sure they did not cheat to do it.** And you do not get to cheat either. No miracles, no “It was only a dream,” no “suddenly, Martians invaded, and everyone stopped fighting each other to fight them, and humanity, upon conquering the aliens, lived ever after in harmony and joy.” Make them earn their victories, because we do not care about characters who are saved. **We care about characters who save themselves and each other.**

EXERCISE: Less-Than-Life-or-Death Stakes

- Remind yourself that your reader may know or care nothing about the subject you've chosen as your character's problem (trigonometry tests being a quick example of a problem that is not universal).
- Write down three ways to make the problem bigger for the character, and more universal for your reader:

1. **Show us the REASON WHY the hero cares so much about this problem. Make it something that will make us care, too.**

2. **Show us how the hero's problem will, unsolved, negatively change the hero's whole life.**
3. **Show us how the hero's problem will, unsolved, negatively change the lives of others who know (and even who don't know) the hero.**

Transitions

Finally, it's time to deal with transitions. There are two things you need to know about transitions that will keep you out of trouble and keep your story moving at a good pace.

One: There is no such thing as a transitional scene.

I told you this at the very beginning. Here it is again. There are scenes, and there are transitions, and never the twain shall meet.

- **Scenes move the story forward.**
- **Transitions move us over the boring parts where nothing is happening.**

If you try to write a transitional scene, you will—by definition—be injecting a non-scene where nothing is happening in between two scenes where something is.

This is what we commonly call A Bad Thing.

With transitions, you Get In, you Get Out, you Move On. Think *bad date*, or *boring party*, or *job you loathe beyond reason*. Get In, Get Out, Move On.

Two: Any amount of time and space may be covered by a two-line transition.

If three seconds have passed between scenes, you can deal with that in two lines. If three centuries have passed between scenes, you can cover that in two lines, too. There is no law that says you must write about the boring stuff in between scenes because there's a lot of it. There is, however, a publishing law that says you won't sell if you do. Remember, it is *your job* to leave out the boring stuff.

Get In, Get Out Transitions

With transitions you have a Get In, and a Get Out. (The Move On is writing the actual next scene, which we've covered in enormous detail everywhere else in this course.)

- **The Get In is where you leave your character before skipping over the “nothing is happening” part**—it needs to be someplace memorable, because ends of chapters are where readers put down books, and you want to leave them with something that sticks in their minds. It really helps if your Get In leaves the character with some pressing problem (because ends of chapters are where readers put down books, and *sometimes don't pick them back up again*. A good, pressing problem will bring most of them back.)
- **The Get Out is where you leave the boring stuff, and remind us where we were before we jumped.** Sometimes your Get Out will follow your Get In immediately in sequence if not in time. Sometimes, it will bring the reader back to a character who was left behind so you could move into a secondary storyline. Either way, all you're doing with your Get Out is bringing your reader back up to speed on where that character was.

Here are examples of workable transitions—they include the ending sentence of the previous scene, and the first sentence of the next scene:

EXAMPLE 1:

Lauren stared out the window, her fingers clenched to the sill, wondering when the phone would ring.

#

Three AM, and a nagging noise woke her from a nightmare. Fire alarm? Someone at the door?

EXAMPLE 2:

(Scene takes place in 1983) Ryan held her hands and, with tears running down his cheeks, whispered, "I'll come back for you, Mary...I promise."

#

On a cool afternoon in October, 2008, Mary, busy helping her daughter Lauren with her trigonometry homework, got up when the doorbell rang and went to see if the book on macramé she as waiting for had arrived.

EXAMPLE 3:

(Scene takes place in 2008) I could only think, sliding into my crypt after draining that bizarre priest of his sweet, sweet blood, how much I loved New York City.

#

The first thing I noticed when I finally managed to push aside the lid of my crypt was that it looked like a bomb had hit the mausoleum. (We'll say this happens five hundred years later, but it could be any time.)

EXERCISE: Get In, Get Out Transitions

This one is quick, easy and fun. For ten minute, just write two-sentence blocks with your Get In, your break (the pound sign) and your Get Out. Do as many as you can, as quickly as you can, imagining all sorts of crazy scenarios where you jump from past to future, from country to country, from planet to planet. Get In, Get Out transitions are greates for picking up with the same character you left. They're also not bad for transitions between scenes with characters who are both in the same storyline (hero and heroine, for example) who are separated by time and place. They're not so great for transitions between main story scenes and subplot scenes, because you want to be able to use the Get Out to bring your reader straight from your Get In transition back to the same storyline.

HELPFUL NOTE: You can use Get In, Get Out transitions in between other Get In, Get Out transitions if you're intertwining storylines. Just remember that your Get Out will refer back to the Get In from the last scene in the same storyline, and not the last scene you wrote (if those two are different).

Meanwhile Transitions

The only difference between a Get In, Get Out transition and a Meanwhile transition is that you use Meanwhile transitions when switching characters. They're characterized by the use of the word "meanwhile," or by similar phrases: "at the same time," "moments later, in another part of the galaxy," "just across the street, however," "days later, in a bar outside of Austin," and so on.

Meanwhile Transitions are best for simultaneous action, but they also work for skipping time and space when you're skipping character.

HELPFUL NOTE: You can insert scenes with Meanwhile transitions in between scenes with Get In, Get Out transitions.

Here are a few Meanwhile examples. We'll go back to our Get Out sentences from the previous exercise.

EXAMPLE 1:

Lauren stared out the window, her fingers clenched to the sill, wondering when the phone would ring.

#

Meanwhile, across town, Kevin lay on the riverbank, robbed, stabbed, and naked, staring up at the night sky, wondering if he would be able to drag himself up the bank into view of the traffic he could hear rushing past before he bled to death.

EXAMPLE 2:

Ryan held her hands and, with tears running down his cheeks, whispered, "I'll come back for you, Mary...I promise."

#

In Fayetteville, North Carolina, the order for the US armed forces to attack Grenada reached Ryan's commander, who immediately recalled all leaves.

EXAMPLE 3:

I could only think, sliding into my crypt after draining that bizarre priest of his sweet, sweet blood, how much I loved New York City.

#

Meanwhile, the shaken Priest of Neferhatrack got to his feet and raised his arms to the sky, calling down the Curse Against Vampires on the entire city of New York.

EXERCISE: Meanwhile Transitions

Okay, your turn.

Same ten minutes, but this time, work on Meanwhiles.

When you finish, we'll transition ourselves to troubleshooting your scenes.

Troubleshooting Scene Issues

Time

- **Flashbacks, Flashforwards, Dream Sequences, and Other Nonsequential Material**

These all give writers trouble. We all understand that used sparingly, they're interesting; used excessively, they're tedious; and they can get way out of control if you don't pay attention to the following three rules of thumb:

- 1) **Use them to move the story forward, NOT as a way of introducing backstory.**

This is counterintuitive, I know. But what you want to do when you're messing around with time in your work is show bits of information that directly affect what is going on right now in your story. Bits of atoms that smash like atoms in a particle accelerator. You want to flash back to show your villain learning to dissect puppies as a child, right before you show him smiling and giving a lift to that cute young thing thumbing on the side of the road.

- 2) **Use action, action, action.**

When we go to the trouble of traveling backward or forward or sideways in time (dreams, you know), we want to have the trip be worth our while. A flashback to your character trading with the HooToo tribe of North Bangolia as a young man, and narrowly avoiding becoming the featured entree on the night's menu in the process, is a GREAT flashback. Watching your heroine sitting on the balcony earlier that morning, sipping tea and thinking about what she needed to accomplish later in the day is NOT. Unless immediately after that, someone shoots her. (At her. **At** her, I meant. I wouldn't actually want anyone to shoot a balcony-sitting, tea-sipping thinker in a novel. Really.)

- 3) **Keep it short.**

You're looking at a tolerance level among readers that probably won't run beyond one thousand words, and in most cases is going to start getting a bit squirmy around one page—figure 300 words in a printed novel.

This does not apply if your entire novel is structured to play with time. It only applies if your novel is generally linear, and you're inserting a handful of flashbacks, flashforwards, or dream sequences in the whole thing. In those cases, I try to limit myself to one flashback and one dream sequence per book, and that's pretty much it. I'll do more if they tie into supernatural elements linked to the core of the plot, but I do my best to keep the story linear.

- **Step-By-Step Tedium**

...And then he walked down the long corridor, and looked left and right, and decided to turn right. And then he looked at the stones on the wall, but didn't see the pattern he was looking for, so he kept walking. At the next intersection, he decided to turn left, but he discovered the end of that corridor had collapsed, so he had to backtrack, and it was just as well, because the air was better in the right corridor. And...

Contrast that with:

Jim wandered around in the maze of corridors trying to find the Glyph of Gold.

I have four handy pointers for when step-by-step action is useful (and there are **absolutely** times when it's the best thing since black cherries straight from the fridge) as opposed to when you're going to KILL your reader if you keep doing that. Here they are:

1. **Every step has to be interesting.**

There are no exceptions to this rule. If you're writing what your character is doing second by second, he'd better be dismantling a bomb that's got seven seconds left until it blows up the city, or picking the lock to the tomb door while the water rises around him and the poor schmucks who went down into the ruins try to kill each other so they'll have someone to stand on.

2. **Each step has to provide critical information that moves the story forward.**

When your character rolls out of bed in the morning, we only need to know about it if he sprains his ankle (which will cause him to hobble later when being chased by monsters), or if he discovers that during the night, someone has nailed 30 slices of individually wrapped Kraft Cheese to the wall above his head. If he gets out of bed and nothing has changed, **skip that part**. We do not need to know, and we will not thank you for telling us.

3. **The reader has to care.**

If the difference between dismantling the bomb is the red wire versus the green wire, and our hero is red/green colorblind, then you can certainly spare a couple paragraphs in the middle of dismantling the bomb to let me listen to him trying to get the moron who's talking him through Bomb Dismantlement 101 (while safely escaping the city) to understand the hero's colorblindness and to guess which, the red or the green wire, might be a darker shade of gray. I will absolutely care about that.

If, however, you take time from bomb dismantlement to have the Escaping Idiot (he got a promotion to capital letters, lucky him,) to talk the hero through the **history** of bombs and bomb dismantlement, your book and I are not going to be friends.

4. **The time to use step-by-step action is when the action is hottest and things are happening in a whirlwind.**

Like many other things in writing fiction, this one is counterintuitive. It would seem when things are happening quickly, you would just keep them moving, you would be sparse and terse, you would get the scene done. Problem is, when you do this, you discover afterwards your climactic finish to a 180,000-word novel is exactly 423 words long, and makes as much sense as the car that tears by you at 200 miles per hour as you're walking the other way. It's there, it's gone, you don't know what blew by you. You have a vague sense it was yellow.

For your most important scenes, take the time to write out—for your own use—every critical event that happens in the scene. And use that information to slow down your most important scenes, to get every last critical detail in there, and to make every single one matter to you, your story, and the reader.

EXAMPLE:

- Hero pulls out Swiss Army knife he used earlier, and it IS one of the models with both flat and Phillips screwdriver heads.
- Hero removes bomb casing while everyone screams.
- Hero discovers that bomb really is a bomb, and that fissionable material is ready to fizz.
- Hero notifies Escaping Idiot of this fact. Screamers begin to flee.
- Escaping Idiot provides step-by-step instructions, which hero follows.
- They hit the red/green wire dilemma, and Escaping Idiot cannot figure out which might be the darker gray.
- Hero begs one of the Fleeing Screamers to come help him, and only a six-year-old kid turns back.
- Six-year-old shows hero which one is the green wire.

- Hero and kid save day.

- **Misdirection**

Misdirection is not lying to the reader. It is, instead, getting the reader to look to the left while you neatly rearrange things to the right. It is making the reader believe the real problem Jim faces in the Temple of Ick is finding the Glyph of Gold, when in fact the real problem is that, in finding the Glyph of Gold, Jim and Missy are going to be right in the heart of the Evil Soul-Sucking Room of Despair and Death, Version 2.3. (Though still conveniently close to the latrines.)

I'll let you in on a secret. I almost never hit misdirection right on the first draft. For me, the process is a case of reading through scenes I've written during revision, discovering characters I've forgotten about and threads I've dropped, and thinking, "Aha! I can have some fun with this."

And then rewriting the scene or character so that the story seems to lead along one path when it is, in fact, barreling quickly and dangerously down another.

This is not hard to do (in revision). Here's how to make misdirection happen:

1. **Determine, after reading through your first draft, where you want the reader to think situations are different from what they really are.**

You want Jim to be secretly trying to kill off Missy in the Soul-Sucking Room of Despair? You want the Escaping Idiot to have been the one who planted the bomb? You want the blood dripping down the corner of that white wall to be from the killer, who was taken out by the ninety-pound heroine? Not a problem.

Figure out what you want to be going on for real, and write it down.

2. **Then look for characters you can make look guilty, props you can make conveniently appear and disappear, bits of dialogue that you wrote and then never followed up, bits of action that happened without repercussion—for example, character leaves room abruptly, gun is shown, then never used, safe falls from tenth-story window onto talking duck.**

You want these to be areas, characters, and actions you can build on. You're going to layer fake stories over the real one.

3. **Figure out a second line of the story, and at the same time, figure out your REASON WHY.** The real line of the Temple of Ick story becomes Jim wanting to kill Missy because...whatever. He has his reasons, and we can assume they're wicked and conniving. Okay, this will work. She got the map to the Temple of Ick site from her dying uncle who owns the land for some obscure reason. Jim wants the treasure, but he doesn't want to share it. Missy's been, um, bossy.

The layered fake story, then, is that Jim and Missy, perhaps no longer wildly in love, but trying to make their marriage work, go on an adventure to find Uncle Ratley's bequest. Jim will take good care of Missy while they're inbound through the jungle and all of that: he needs her help to pack in the useful exploring tools, and to take care of the mules, and maybe she's been kind of nervous about letting him hold the map, and he wants to get her well away from civilization before he offs her. Anyway, that's your Reason Why.

4. **Then you just go through and add in places where Jim makes tiny mistakes in dealing with Missy that leave the reader...uneasy.** But NOT suspicious. Your reader should be able to write off Jim's earliest slips as just the two of them having trouble with their marriage. It will be helpful to your cause to write Missy as something other than the Perfect Victim, too. She should get a bit bitchy with Jim from time to time, and not necessarily because he did anything to deserve it. Don't go overboard with this—ideally, your reader will still like both your heroine and your villain while distrusting the guy who rented them the mules, or the guy who took their tiny expedition upriver on a creaky flatboat.
5. **If you do it well, when your villain reveals himself as the monster he is, your reader will go, "Damn, I should have seen that, all the clues were there," and not, "Huh? What happened?" or "Oh, please, I**

saw that coming in Chapter One.”

Here's something else I've learned. No matter how well you do it, you will have some readers who will see it coming and comment on how lame you are—and you will have some readers who missed the subtle hints, and who are now staring at the book thinking you pulled a rabbit out of places where rabbits should never have been, and shame on you.

You cannot please everybody, and you must not try. Do the best you can, but understand that if you have people who love your work, you will also have people who hate it, and just go on with your life.

Characters

- **Choosing The Viewpoint Character for a Scene**

When you're writing along, you'll discover some scenes seem to want to be told by characters other than your main character. If you've planned ahead for this and were already working in multiple viewpoints, it's no problem. If, however, you were working in a single viewpoint, and the scene in question will stick your book with just one or two scenes from a POV other than that of your main character, it's a problem. Fix it in the planning stages if you can, or if you're already writing, stop and fix it now. Confusion about POV characters is one of the few writing problems you should not leave until revision if you discover it partway through a book.

So, when is it worth the trouble to write the scene from a different viewpoint, and when do you stick with just one? And if you use multiple viewpoints, which viewpoint is best for each scene? I've come up with a sort of *Whose Eyes Do We Look Through Now?* formula:

1. **Determine the structure for your book.** (This is critical, but I went through it all with **Create A Plot Clinic** at length—and that was the short version. If you don't know structure, pick up Plot Clinic. <http://novelwritingschool.com/recommends/plot-clinic>)
2. **If you're going with a straight one-person POV and you had a good reason for picking that structure, stick with it.** Lose the scenes from alternate points of view.
3. **If you're going with multiple POVs, then you want the following person to be the POV character (listed from most to least important):**
 - The person who is going to get in trouble in this scene.
 - The person who is doing the most interesting thing in this scene.
 - The person who has the most to lose in this section of the story.
 - The person who knows the least about what is going on.

Default to the person who's going to get into trouble in the scene, because that's almost always where the excitement will be. If this is not a getting-in-trouble sort of scene, then who's doing something fascinating? Give him or her the scene. If no one is doing anything particularly interesting...um, you need to fix that. But once you do, give scenes to the person who is going to get in trouble later in the story, and build some tension and some anticipation for them.

And if all else fails, give the scene to the clueless one, because he'll need to find out what's going on, and while he's bumbling around discovering it, you're working in background without barfing up an infodump.

- **Introducing Secondary Characters**

This really isn't a huge problem if you've plotted out at least a short critical-scenes outline for your book in advance of writing it. You'll have a good idea of who the main and secondary characters are going to be, and if one ambles onto the stage unexpectedly, you can decide to keep him (if he arrives in the first third of the book), decide to keep him and work in back scenes for him later (if he arrives after the first third in a story that hasn't been

changing locations and situations a lot), or take his résumé and use him in some other story.

But how do you decide if he should stay or go, and how much of a role he deserves?

1. Does he do anything other characters already do?

I'm bad about this in first draft. I'll have two or three different characters working the same angles of the story. A couple of villains who could be rolled into one, a few different male characters who could become one "hero's best friend," different people the heroine gets advice from who could become "the heroine's mentor."

If a new character tries to fulfill roles already played by other characters, figure out what traits he has that you liked and that your subconscious decided the book needed, and give those traits to an existing character.

2. Does he take the story in a new direction?

This can be a couple of things going on. **One, your subconscious could be trying to sneak a new book in on you.** This also happens to me a lot. The cure is to excise the character and his new direction, write them down somewhere, and get back to **that** story idea when you've finished writing **this** book.

Two, your subconscious could be giving you some brilliant new layers for your existing story. In which case, you keep the character, add the layers, play with the additional intrigue, subterfuge, and misdirection, and your book is all the richer for the experience.

So how do you tell which is which?

I wish I knew. I've been suckered by characters with a good come-on line more times than I care to admit to. If you read my writing diary on *The Wreck of Heaven* while I was writing it, you'll discover I got suckered once by a woman who was, I think, an undercover FBI agent—I don't remember offhand—and then suckered a second time by characters whose actions didn't measure up to my standards. I ended up throwing out more than two-hundred finished pages of manuscript on that book, not once, but TWICE. Using the page setup I was using then, that comes out to tossing about 100,000 words. While on deadline.

If you like watching real-life horror stories unfold, start here and read from bottom to top and back to front.

<http://hollylisle.com/writingdiary2/index.php/category/books/world-gates/the-wreck-of-heaven/page/31/>

Here's what I look for, though:

- How much will this character change the direction of my story?
- How much of what I've already done will I have to go back and redo in my revision?
- How much wonderfulness will this character add?
- And finally, am I on a tight deadline where a rogue character could really screw up my life?

• **Getting Emotion Into Scenes**

I get a lot of questions about this. "How do I make the reader feel what the character is feeling?" "How do I put what I'm feeling onto the page?" "How do I get emotion into my scenes?"

Half of this is writing technique. You have to do the following things:

1. SHOW us how your character is feeling.

Don't write, *She felt sad.*

Write, *Her fingers knotted into fists, and she bit her lip and swallowed against the tears that kept trying to come.*

2. **Make us IDENTIFY with the character's reactions.**

If the guy just found out his mother died, you've committed yourself to following this line through several scenes, and probably to the end of the book. If you show us he's torn up about it in chapter three, but then never mention her or her death again, we're going to subconsciously come to hate this guy because he's such a cold, uncaring bastard. You have to show, in subsequent scenes, how this news has changed things for him, how he wishes he'd been there, how he struggles with the hole that's been created in his life. How her death changes him.

On the other hand, if his goldfish dies, and he's still going on about it three scenes later, we're going to think, and probably justifiably so, he's a drama queen.

3. **FOLLOW the emotion.**

As mentioned above, once you introduce something emotionally rough, you have to keep track of it through the story. You have to follow the ripples. Events in real life do not happen in a vacuum. They have consequences for people, and for the people who know those people. When you fail to create this effect in your writing, you get stories that do not move you.

4. **Write what MATTERS TO YOU.**

We as readers can only care about characters who care about things that matter to us. (Another reason you cannot write for everyone, and must not try.) We as readers are going to dislike characters who don't feel about things the way we would, if we consider those things important.

We as readers will end up *disliking writers* whose characters scoff at things that matter to us, and who make a big deal about things we can't stand or consider irrelevant. **This is unavoidable.** No matter what side of life your character takes his stand on, and no matter where you draw your own lines, there are going to be people who disagree with you, who can't see things your way, who hate your characters, and who think you're an idiot.

Take me as an example.

I can't identify with characters in novels who live to shop, because I hate shopping the way caged animals hate cattle prods. I am desperate to get back out the door of a mall the second I am forced through one. I hate to look at clothes, and if I find a blouse style I like, I'll buy all of them available in my size in the store right then, and wear them until they wear out, just to be done with shopping. I own, at present, three pairs of shoes, and one of them is ready for the trash, but I use that pair for mowing the lawn, so I can get another year or two out of it. I don't own any high heels. I don't own any dress shoes.

I like books, I like office supplies, I like computer stuff, and I like yarn, and all of those I can get online, though most of the time I can behave myself in a bookstore for about an hour before the walls start closing in and I need to leave.

So those bright pink books with pictures of women in stiletto heels and trendy outfits carrying scads of shopping bags on the covers **weren't written for me.**

But that's okay. They were written, (we hope, anyway) by writers to whom that stuff, which bores the bejeezus out of me, matters greatly—and they are read by readers to whom it also matters.

If you will just write what matters to you, you will find a market made up of people who *get* you, and who get what you're doing. And the rest of them? *They're not your market. Stop obsessing about them.*

If you are trying writing things you don't care about just to make money, you're going to be one miserable little writer. The emotion you put onto the page is going to ring false to the readers you're

trying to reach, and never even get noticed by people who would like what you did if you were doing what you liked.

- **The other half of putting emotion on the page, frankly, is acting.** You have to become your character. You have to close your eyes and slide into his or her skin. You have to be able to play both genders in your head to do this well, which can be a real beast. And you have to see what he sees, feel what he feels, experience taste and smell and sound and emotion from inside of his body.

You have to write emotional scenes from that place, knowing, even if you've never been through it, what it's like to lose a parent...or a goldfish. How do you do this?

1. Draw from your own experience, and then extrapolate. And exaggerate.

Imagine your triumphs had been greater, your disasters bigger, your losses enormous, your injuries near-life-threatening.

That skinned knee when you were six becomes having your leg eaten off by a wolf, while your kitten that died under the hydrangea bushes becomes your entire village wiped out by pox and covered with flies.

A roadkill armadillo becomes battlefield dead a day later.

Winning the spelling bee in the sixth grade becomes winning the election for president, and outrunning that boy in eighth grade who used to tease you mercilessly becomes an Olympic gold medal and a world record to boot.

Triumph is triumph, and defeat is defeat, and the kid who got a D on a test he thought he aced knows the same pain as the millionaire who got creamed in the stock market. You're human. Speak to us from the experience of being human, and we will understand.

2. Read books on acting, or take acting lessons.

In my experience, most writers (including me) are natural hams, and very good at imagining the worst case scenario while putting themselves right in it. But if you're not, getting some training in the community theater or in a community college class or something along those lines cannot hurt.

3. Live a bit longer.

If unthinkable piles of heartbreak, tragedy, and drama have not yet pounded you into a thin, gruel-y paste, just hang around a while. They will. And the horrible thing is, while you're suffering through disaster, some wicked part of the back of your mind is going to be cackling gleefully, "Man, I know just how I can use this in a book."

This is what writers do, and it is a part of ourselves we don't like much while we're in the midst of disaster.

But look at the bright side. If you're thinking about how you can use your disaster in a book, you're planning on surviving. In the midst of ruin and pain and despair, having a plan for living through it and coming out on the other side can save your life. I've been there. I know.

Take the short course *21 Ways To Get Yourself Writing When Your Life Has Just Exploded* if you're currently going through disaster or have just wrapped one up. Back in 1994, I learned—the hard way—how to mine that particularly rich field to get good fiction. <http://novelwritingschool.com/recommends/21-ways>

Dialogue

- **The Walk and Talk**

The problem: two people talking to each other on a page and nothing else happening at all.

The cure for the common Talking-Heads Dialogue problem (where your characters might as well be talking to each other in a white room during pea-soup indoor fog) is the **Walk and Talk**.

It goes like this:

1. You choose a location where your two characters can be doing something.

Mending a saddle, baking cookies, watching girls on a beach, whatever. They are ENGAGED in the world.

2. You get them talking about the thing they have on their minds, which is unrelated to what they're doing.

For example, they're watching girls, but they're talking about the physics exam they both have to take the next day, which they probably should be studying for.

3. And then you work what you actually want them to talk about in between the action that they're doing.

We'll go back to Jim and Missy and the universe in which Jim plans to kill Missy for this example:

Jim and Missy hacked away at the vines blocking the entrance to the Temple of Ick.

"You know your cousin Elsie called the other day about the will," Jim said.

"I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me?" Missy yanked away a long, thin vine and wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her leather glove.

"I told her to mind her own business. She was asking a lot of questions about why you inherited a map, and wondering if maybe you would show it to her and the rest of the cousins. I said while she was wondering about that, you were wondering why she got an actual money bequest, and maybe she'd like to trade." Jim backed up and began flailing at the ground with his machete. "Coral snake," he said after a minute.

"You kill it?"

Jim squinted at the ground. "Yeah, but watch out for the head. It'll still be able to bite for hours."

"Appropriate," Missy said. "Sounds kind of like Elsie." She grinned a little, even though every muscle in her body felt like one big bruise. "Nice job dealing with her, by the way."

Jim smiled. It was the first good smile she'd seen on his face in...she couldn't even remember how long.

He shrugged and said, "You and I always did agree about your cousin Elsie. She's more of a snake than anything we'll run into out here." And then he went back to cutting away underbrush, and the moment passed.

Description

• **How to Avoid Getting Bugged Down In Description**

A lot of getting bogged down in description, unfortunately, devolves into issues we writers have with excessive worldbuilding and excessive love of worldbuilding, and these are issues far too large to handle here. They will have to wait for the *Create A World Clinic*.

<http://novelwritingschool.com/recommends/world-clinic>

For now, though, here are some quick questions to ask yourself to keep you out of the description swamps.

1. Who needs to know this?

Pearl-handled knife. Great.

Silver-filigree-inlaid pearl-handled knife. All right, maybe.

Silver-filigree-inlaid pearl-handled Ottoman Empire knife with a blade formed by repeated firing and bending of the metal in a process only known to a few master metalsmiths, and then lost and still unknown today—a knife stolen by Cossacks and treasured by Celts and owned by a Rockefeller who used it to secretly murder a Carnegie—a knife which was then lost in an attic until it was recovered by your heroine, who does not know any of this stuff...

No. No. No. If your book is titled *The Knife* and details the entire history of the knife from the moment it was forged to the present day, including its owners and its ghosts, fine, yes, we need to know all of that. If, however, your heroine is going to use the knife as a letter opener and we're never going to see it again, delete every word after pearl-handled knife. We. Don't. Need. To. Know.

2. Are you going to use it later?

You can get away with a certain amount of frou-frou nonsense in a novel, just because they have a lot of elbow room in them by virtue of being novels. How much is a certain amount?

Not much.

We need to know the angle of the sunlight lying across the carpet and touching the red rose at the far side IF you're using that to show time of day, and IF you're going to use it later for the heroine to realize she's been sleeping for hours (because the sun has moved), or to demonstrate we've entered a different universe, (because the house has moved and is now sitting at right angles to where it was), or for any of dozens of other reasons.

We need to know the wallpaper on the wall is the original Victorian stuff that was applied by the first owner IF your hero is going to have to peel some of it off later, and IF your hero is going to discover a secret passageway/photos of an old murder scene/the original deed to the land/a gateway into another universe.

I am not a fan of description for description's sake. Don't like reading it, don't like writing it. Description, I think, should be multi-use for both the writer and the reader. And by that, I mean the description *now* needs to become an active part of the story *soon*. **You don't need to know what you'll use it for while you're writing it.** You just need to know that you will.

An aside here while I emphasize this point. Early testers of this course expressed uncertainty and disbelief on this point, figuring that what I meant to say was, *For the exercises, you don't need to know what you'll use all your description for.* That isn't what I mean at all.

I really, truly, honestly mean that *part of the process of writing the first draft of a novel involves throwing things into your scenes just because they're cool*, because they're interesting, or because something in the back of your mind says, "Do it!"

Your subconscious mind—your muse—has mysterious concepts brewing down there in the dark that you know nothing about. If it tosses you a ballerina traipsing through the middle of a fight scene, if it hands you an incongruent green-silk-dress at a football game, if it tosses you one pink M&M in the middle of a bag of the regular-colored ones...go with it. Tell yourself, "At some point I'm going to know why that's there." And then just keep on writing. If you never figure out why it's there, toss it in the revision. If you do, however, you're going to be stunned by the cool surprise you got by listening to your subconscious.

I will, while writing, add in the occasional beefy description without knowing why I'll need it later, but **I will plan on needing it later.**

That's just laying the groundwork and setting up random dominoes so you can stack more dominos behind them later, and then knock them down to the astonishment and delight of all. It's like wiring a house and

putting in way more outlet boxes than you could ever possibly need, just because if you do need them, they'll be there.

However, *when I go back in revision* and discover I have excessive historical pearl-handled knives cluttering my tables and random sunbeams going nowhere and ornate wallpaper that never means anything, I'll delete those things down to sparse descriptions. Cover over those empty outlet boxes if you don't use them. They will not improve the look of your finished house.

- **How to Incorporate Sensory Detail and Atmosphere Without Slowing the Pace**

You'll use the same two questions you used in avoiding getting bogged down with description.

1. **Who needs to know this?**

Most writers don't overuse sensory details—some, unfortunately, barely use them at all. But it is possible to overload your reader's senses, just as it's possible to bog him down with description. This is just a much rarer problem.

You do want to let the reader know that the velvet pillow the heroine touches reminds her of one she used to love in her next-door neighbor's house when she was five. (*I still* remember those velvet pillows my neighbor had, and how I loved to go to her house just to sit on her couch and touch them. Yes, I was five. Velvet pillows were the most extravagant thing I had ever seen at the age of five. They were embroidered with gold thread and had gold tassels, and I loved them beyond words.) This tells the reader something about the character, it makes the character more real, and that's important.

However, if your character is slogging through a jungle, and you're giving us the sounds of monkeys and macaws and screaming panthers and skritchng insects and cheeping frogs at the same time you're giving us the smell of mold and must and decay, and animal droppings, and smoke from somewhere in the distance, *at the same time* you're giving us the oppressive heat, and the humidity, and the sweat trickling down our spines, and the itch of insect bites, and the sensation of something squirming up the leg of our pants, **AT THE SAME TIME** that you're giving us the taste of old, bad mushrooms on our tongues, **AT THE SAME TIME** that you're giving us the claustrophobic sight of enormous leaves and spiky leaves and frond-y leaves right up in our faces, along with the tangled vines, the twisted tree knees rising out of the jungle floor, the misshapen tree trunks that grow apart and together and apart and together again like some H. R. Giger nightmare come to life—**AND** your characters are having a conversation at the same time?

We're going to feel overwhelmed. This is, granted, what walking through a jungle is like. (I trudged through jungles in Costa Rica and Belize as a kid—parents were missionaries, I have war stories galore—and jungles are very, very scary places. They are, in fact, the sort of scary that clings to you decades later and makes you write about trees that eat people.) If the point of your scene is to scare the crap out of the reader, okay. What you want are lots of icky sensory details crowded in and made oppressive and piled on.

If the point of the scene is the conversation that's going on, then **We. Don't. Need. To. Know** all the gory jungle details. At least not all at once.

2. **Are you going to use it later?**

Back to the jungle with me. If the jungle is going to play a role in your story—the actual jungle itself, the terrain, the weather conditions, the animals, and so on—then those sensory details are important. Bring them in, use them. Use the moment when the jungle falls silent, signaling the approach of a big predator on the hunt. Give us the sensation of bugs under our clothes. Give us the smells and tastes and textures, the sights and sounds, and then *give us the consequences*. The boa constrictor that drops onto the member of the party just ahead of us. The scorpion in our shoe the next morning. The villagers clearing everything they value out of the way of the approaching army ants.

If the jungle is just a scenic backdrop against which you plan to have two characters falling in love, give us a bit of humidity, a couple of frog cheeps, and the tantalizing sound of a waterfall somewhere in the distance, and get on with your story.

- **Revising Description**

By the time you reach the end of your first draft, you'll have put in bits of description that, if you judge them fairly, are way over the top for what your story needs. You'll have a bunch of story stubs you never picked up in the first draft—fancy knives, gorgeous women propped against walls, meticulously detailed fireplace lintels that just sit there. Most of this stuff needs to go.

However, before you delete anything, go through the whole manuscript one more time. Looking for places where you could actually *use* the goodies you built with such loving care.

Could that fancy knife become more than a letter opener? Could that gorgeous woman become an extra murder victim? Or be one of the suspects for the role of the spy who betrayed the hero at the party? Could that beautiful fireplace lintel hide a secret door with a treasure of some sort behind it, or the mechanism that causes the wall next to the fireplace to open, revealing a hidden room?

Everything is rough in first draft. Accept this, and consider your revision not the place to simply correct errors, but the place to look for opportunities. You put them into your story. Now all you have to do is recognize them.

Conclusion

Writing scenes, like plotting and developing characters and creating worlds and designing cultures and languages, is something you can learn—but no matter how long you write, there will still be more to learn. This is a starting place, a jumping off point, an introduction. From here, what you do is write, and keep writing. You take action, you push yourself to be the best you can be right now, and then you let your work go, knowing what you will do tomorrow will be better, but today you did this, and your best right now is good enough.

Keep learning. Keep reaching. Dream, but when you dream, act to make your dreams real. You can do this.

When you do, let me know. You can write to me at courses@hollylisle.com.

I'm cheering for you.

Holly Lisle
4/25/08