



Writing Tips: How To Craft A Compelling Scene

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As author and writing mentor *Rosie O'Neill* shares, scenes are the DNA of stories. When we understand how to craft a compelling scene we take huge steps toward writing a *page-turning book*. Here are tips on how to do just that.



Scenes really are the building blocks of any novel, a pocket of story that frames your characters and plot in a defined time and place.

Making sure these building blocks are working hard for your manuscript helps to develop a finished project that's really captivating and compelling – and crucially, not carrying any extra weight or unnecessary words.

These are things I usually dig into as I'm revising or editing, but if you're a writer who outlines extensively, it can also be a great way to plan a really secure first draft.

1. Is your scene doing enough?

Your first point of call is to assess *why* the scene is there in the first place. What's it doing in the wider landscape of your novel, and is it doing enough to stay in there as you revise?

It can be very tempting to be self-indulgent when it comes to including favorite scenes in final drafts, especially if you've fallen in love with a certain character or moment in your story – but you've got to be ruthless if you want your book to be a compelling, gripping read.

Really, a scene should be doing at least one job in order to secure its place in your manuscript (but preferably two or three). These jobs can include:

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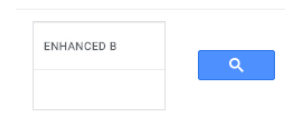
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Moving the plot forwards. Whatever your genre, you'll need to drip-feed information across your scenes in order to move things along. Including these little snippets in as many scenes as possible helps avoid info-dumping, and makes sure you have the chance to foreshadow important twists and lay the foundations for a great climax.

Moving the character emotionally. In order to have a dynamic and active plot, your scene should really be driven by the emotional arc and development of your characters.

They need to be **making decisions** (good or bad) and taking action, rather than having the plot just 'happen' to them. Their decisions should reflect their emotional arc and inform some kind of consequence that can be felt either immediately or in a later scene.



Building the world. Here you use the scene to add depth to your story. You might drop in a few details which hint at the history, or expand on the reader's view of the world. It's important to scatter this information throughout to keep it readable and interesting – so it's always worth considering if you've included a little in each scene.

Building the character. Just like with world-building, character backstory can't be offloaded in one go. Consider including only relevant details as you write each scene. This might look like backstory informing a particular character decision or helping to give context to an important relationship.

2. Include only what you need to

A truly **compelling** scene is one where we're only shown what's really necessary for that particular moment. Remember that your words are important and shouldn't be wasted or thrown away on something accidental or unintentional in the greater landscape of your story.

Start and finish in the right place. Just like an opening chapter, your individual scenes need to be framed to capture the important bits. Start too much before the action and the scene will feel drawn out and boring, but remember that you'll need to include some context to help sustain and inform the timeframe and setting.

Let the reader know where and when we are, but don't get bogged down in the set-up of your scene. You might not need to show your character's journey to work, for example (unless something exciting happens along the way), but you can use clues and descriptions to let the reader know it's the following morning and the character is in their office.

Choose the right characters, setting and POV. If you've got a large cast of characters in your story, think carefully about who really needs to be in the scene. Consider what information we're going to learn, and which characters need that information going forward, or think about your goal for that particular scene.

Are you setting up a potential future conflict between two characters? Or showing a changing group dynamic in readiness for a betrayal further into your story?

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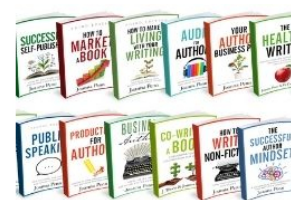
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Similarly, if you're writing multiple points of view, think about who the scene impacts the most when you're considering whose viewpoint to write from. Setting is also important – as well as the practical, it's worth thinking about how setting the scene somewhere else might influence the atmosphere and the emotion of it.

For example, a character sharing a secret with someone they're just getting to know will feel very intimate if it's in someone's home, just the two of them, but you could potentially raise the anxiety or pressure of the scene if you set it somewhere public, where they might be interrupted.

3. Check your tension

One thing that a captivating scene really hinges on is how clearly it crafts a sense of tension and conflict as you move forwards with your story. And at it's very heart, this all comes down to character **motivation**.

All the characters present in the scene need to have a driving force, goal, or motivation behind their actions. What do they want, and why do they want it?

This gives them a reason for thinking, acting, or speaking the way they do, and actually makes it a whole lot easier to write dialogue (because it really means something for the character). It also helps create an in-story logic that will tie your plot together and build a complex, layered emotional arc.

Tension comes in when you take this motivation or goal and introduce some kind of conflict around it – maybe two characters goals are opposed, or aligned for differing reasons. Creating problems for your characters around their motivations forces them to be active about getting what they want and moving the plot forwards.



4. Fresh ideas

Finally, if you find you have to rewrite or edit heavily, it might help to generate some fresh scene ideas or approach your story from a slightly different angle.

Use your protagonist as a starting point. Think about where they start off



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(emotionally and physically), and where they are by the end of the book – and work out what moments you need to show along their journey to get them between the two points.

Look to your genre as inspiration. Find books and films from the genre you're writing in, and start consuming them as a writer. Identify and analyse the scenes that pop up again and again.

For example, why do most romance stories have a scene where the protagonist has to get advice from their best friend? Think of how you can use (or subvert) these tropes to create scenes in your own story.

Daydream. Not all writing is done at your desk, the time you spend away from your manuscript is just as important because it allows you to be creative without the pressure of the page in front of you.

Spending some time in the fresh air or **moving your body** a little is also a great way to allow your subconscious to untangle plot problems and come up with scene ideas without even feeling like you're working at it.

Ultimately the true test of a compelling scene is being able to **care** about the characters and what they want. When we can connect with a protagonist as a person, and become invested in the way they overcome struggles and conflict, the rest of the scene just needs to showcase that by framing it intentionally, and adding only the necessary depth and detail.

Will you use some of these suggestions when you write your next scene? Please leave your thoughts below and join the conversation.



Rosie O'Neill is a creative writing mentor with a passion for helping writers find purpose through their creativity, overcome the obstacles holding them back, and make a meaningful impact on the world. You can download her [free workbook](#), 'A Season of Words', for creatives wanting to make more time and space to write. She also writes contemporary fantasy fiction for young adults and is currently revising her fourth novel.



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I'm also J.F.Penn, thriller, dark fantasy and crime author



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