Understanding Scenes and Sequels

be-a-better-writer.com/scenes-and-sequels.html

I first encountered the concept of scenes and sequels in a book by Jack M. Bickham, *Scene and Structure: How to construct fiction with scene-by-scene flow, logic and readability.* I always recommend this book to writers not already writing effective scenes because it contains a comprehensive discussion of action/reaction, cause/effect and scenes and sequels, better than anything I've encountered elsewhere.

Over the years I have returned to this book numerous times, each time learning more about the role of cause and effect in creating scenes and sequels. In a nutshell, Bickham explains how to write a scene in **real-time dramatic action** and **dialogue**, with minimal description or character internalizations. The action builds from scene goal, through complications, to scene climax, just as the overall plot does, but on a smaller scale. When the result of the scene goal is known, the scene ends and a sequel begins, consisting of an **emotional reaction**, **thought**, and a **decision**. Scenes and sequels, one after another, written according to cause and effect, action and reaction, allow a story to move swiftly forward.

Scenes and sequels are crucial building blocks of narrative, and creative writers must understand not only what they are, but how to manipulate them to create a desired effect. How often have you been told that a story bogs down because of back-story? Scenes and sequels, correctly used, eliminate the problematic nature of back-story and focus on the forward narrative thrust. Scenes are long. Sequels are short. Scenes are active; sequels allow the character to catch her breath, express emotion at the success or failure in the scene, and think through her options to arrive at a new plan of action. The sequel, not the scene, is the appropriate place to insert any necessary back-story or soul searching.

Scenes and Sequels: Scene

The scene half of scene and sequel usually begins with a statement. (Or the character's goal comes not too far into the story.) In *The Gift of the Magi*, O. Henry creates a **statement of goal** by writing [italics mine] :

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey backyard. *To-morrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only $1.87 with which to buy Jim a present.* She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result.

In a scene, each attempt to succeed at the stated goal is followed by conflict or complications that result in failure, or a tactical disaster. Readers identify with believable characters, and they want the characters to achieve their goals, but they don't want to feel manipulated by the author, so not all failures need be overtly physical. Characters may fail

psychologically, through an inability to understand, or an inability to push past fear, for example. This sequence of events🗣goal, complications, failure🗣creates tension as the reader hopes for a good result, which is repeatedly thwarted. But whatever obstacles you put in your character🏷s way, your challenge is to make the sequence active, smooth, and transparent.

O. Henry raises tension with scenes and sequels in *The Gift of the Magi* by having Della first want to buy a gift for her husband. After the scene set up, she feels despair at her situation and devises a plan to move her toward her goal:

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Della has made her decision. In an active scene, she runs up the road to Mme. Sofronie, who sells 📰hair goods of all kinds. 📰 Now O. Henry shows us the result in real-time:

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick" said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

When Success is Failure

If the result of that scene and sequel were so easy that Della merely sold her hair and bought Jim a satisfactory gift, the story would fail. Instead O. Henry creates the only type of success that is more powerful than failure in a narrative, which is when success creates a terrible irony or a new, larger problem for the character. This type of success trumps failure in your scenes and sequels because it not only increases tension but sends a twinge of pleasure through the reader with its clever twist. Success that is failure almost always comes as a surprise, and surprises resulting from logical cause and effect delight readers.

With money from the sale of her hair, Della buys Jim the perfect gift, a platinum fob chain worthy of his most prized possession🗣his grandfather🏷s gold watch. She hurries home to curl her short hair, worried about what Jim will think. At home, she whispers a silent prayer that he will still find her pretty. Notice that she worries. This too raises tension, as the reader

worries with her. Surely Jim is not so shallow that he will care that she has lost her beautiful locks, the reader thinks, but one never knows. Tension reaches its peak when Jim arrives home.

Of course, all is not well when Jim sees her. This is a story after all, and stories demand complications. He stares at her in the oddest way.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again--you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice-what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

And then the kicker, the one kind of success that is better than failure:

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs--the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise-shell, with jewelled rims--just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

A lesser author might have ended there, but of course O. Henry did not, as the ultimate surprise deepened the failure, even as the gifts succeeded in showing the couple's great love.

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

Scenes and Sequels: Sequels

If *The Gift of the Magi* were a novel, rather than a short story, the story would continue from that point with another sequel. And then many more scenes and sequels. The sequel begins right after the tactical disaster or failure. Or, as in this case, success that created a larger problem. Having not achieved her goal in the scene, the character is thrown into an introspective state in the sequel--first a period of sheer **emotion**, followed by **thought**, which results in a **decision** about what to do, followed by new action, which leads to a scene where the new goal is stated or obviously implied, and the scene cycle begins again. Scene and sequel.

Sometimes writers arrange scenes and sequels as chapters, as Anne Tyler does in *The Accidental Tourist*, which opens with an active scene. When that chapter ends with Sarah asking for a divorce, the second chapter opens with a sequel that shows Macon attempting to make sense of his life in the family home. Again, scene and sequel.

An author may leave a line break and start a sequel directly after the break. Another technique will end the first scene and then moves into a second scene about a different character🗣putting two scenes back to back. The sequel to the first chapter will appear when the author returns to that first character. Barbara Kingsolver uses this technique in *Prodigal Summer*.

Short scenes and sequels may also appear inside larger scenes, with no line break between the scene and sequel, just the swing back and forth from action to reaction, action to reaction. D.H. Lawrence uses scenes and sequels in this way in his story *Rocking Horse Winner*:

The child looked at her to see if she meant it. But he saw, by the lines of her mouth, that she was only trying to hide something from him.

"Well, anyhow," he said stoutly, "I'm a lucky person."

"Why?" said his mother, with a sudden laugh.

He stared at her. He didn't even know why he had said it.

"God told me," he asserted, brazening it out.

"I hope He did, dear!", she said, again with a laugh, but rather bitter.

"He did, mother!"

"Excellent!" said the mother, using one of her husband's exclamations.

The boy saw she did not believe him; or rather, that she paid no attention to his assertion. This angered him somewhere, and made him want to compel her attention.

He went off by himself, vaguely, in a childish way, seeking for the clue to 'luck'. Absorbed, taking no heed of other people, he went about with a sort of stealth, seeking inwardly for luck. He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it. When the two girls were playing dolls in the nursery, he would sit on his big rocking-horse, charging madly into space, with a frenzy that made the little girls peer at him uneasily. Wildly the horse careered, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them. The little girls dared not speak to him.

Here we see the tail end of an active, real-time scene in which a greedy and self-absorbed mother tries to explain luck to her son. When the scene ends, the boy moves off to digest what he has learned. He has an emotional reaction (modern writers would *show* this, but Lawrence, writing in an earlier time, tells readers that the boy is angry). The boy then thinks the matter through, as he should in a sequel, and arrives at a new goal. He will find Luck.

When he had ridden to the end of his mad little journey, he climbed down and stood in front of his rocking-horse, staring fixedly into its lowered face. Its red mouth was slightly open, its big eye was wide and glassy-bright.

"Now!" he would silently command the snorting steed. "Now take me to where there is luck! Now take me!"

And he would slash the horse on the neck with the little whip he had asked Uncle Oscar for. He knew the horse could take him to where there was luck, if only he forced it. So he would mount again and start on his furious ride, hoping at last to get there. "You'll break your horse, Paul!" said the nurse.

"He's always riding like that! I wish he'd leave off!" said his elder sister Joan.

But he only glared down on them in silence. Nurse gave him up. She could make nothing of him. Anyhow, he was growing beyond her.

One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar came in when he was on one of his furious rides. He did not speak to them.

"Hallo, you young jockey! Riding a winner?" said his uncle.

"Aren't you growing too big for a rocking-horse? You're not a very little boy any longer, you know," said his mother.

But Paul only gave a blue glare from his big, rather close-set eyes. He would speak to nobody when he was in full tilt. His mother watched him with an anxious expression on her face.

At last he suddenly stopped forcing his horse into the mechanical gallop and slid down.

"Well, I got there!" he announced fiercely, his blue eyes still flaring, and his sturdy long legs straddling apart.

I'm repeating this, but I want to stress that by following this pattern of scenes and sequels, narrative summary and back-story can be incorporated into the sequels without slowing the action or diluting the tension of the scene. While the scene creates tense, fast moving action, the sequel is all about emotion and logic. Sequels don't normally take up much room on the page, much less than scenes, but they can telescope long periods of time into a short narrative summary.

Aim to write in scenes and sequels like this, and you will notice that your story moves at a much better pace. Keep the scenes active, and separate from the sequels. Combine scenes and sequels inside one larger scene, write them as separate parts of a single chapter, or write them as separate chapters. But immerse readers in the action long enough for them to get involved and care about the characters. Only then move to a sequel. Scene and sequel. Action and reaction.

Going back to the scene goal, once more as well, notice how the scene goal is clearly named in both stories. Della wants to buy Jim a gift, and the boy wants to find luck for his mother. Once readers understand the character's goal, they become invested in the success of the character. When readers can't discern what the character wants in a scene, they feel confused and let down, unsure why the scene exists. So make it easy for your readers to care what happens.

Using only scenes and sequels, you can control pace. Scenes read fast because they're active. Sequels read slower because they're contemplative and because they tend to tell what happens, rather than show the events. This gets boring fast, so keep the sequels short and use as many sensory details as possible in them. If the story moves too slowly, shorten a sequel, or take it out altogether and put two scenes back to back to pick up the pace. But for a dynamic story, always give more time to scenes. Scenes and sequels. Then more scenes and sequels. One, then the other, the entire length of the book.

More Creative Writing Help

Scene Action/Reaction Chart

2. Creative Writing Help
   >
3. Scenes and Sequels