THE SCENE-AND-SEQUEL TECHNIQUE

THE FIVE-MINUTE MAGIC TRICK THAT WILL ROCKET YOUR STORY TENSION INTO THE STRATOSPHERE

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I have a confession:

Despite many tries, I have never been able to finish Tolkien's classic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). My high-water mark was Tom Bombadil about a third of the way through the first book. OK, I'm a rube. I was grateful for Peter Jackson's movies because I finally got a grasp of the story.

Yes, Tolkien's creation of the world of Middle Earth and multiple narrative sidelines is groundbreaking. Genius. The tour guide aspect of Middle Earth is compelling. However, when you consider the actual story-telling in the book version of LOTR, you find it replete with extraneous scenes, multiple tangents, blind endings, and slow setups of the main story (Frodo destroying the One Ring).

As a publisher, story coach, and writer, I encounter many submissions with the same problem of unfocused narrative and lack of story tension. I call this sort of writing One Darn Thing After Another, or ODTAA.

In ODTAA, the story meanders without a point. Events tend to be a string of unrelated problems that, once solved, may or may not advance the story and contribute to the solution of the Story Goal.

Happily, there is an easy solution to ODTAA that I call the Scene-and-Sequel Technique. This technique is magic. When writers start using this, they will find that their story comes into tight focus with clear direction that builds tension from the start till the exciting climax.

To my knowledge, the Scene-and-Sequel technique was first described by Dwight Swain in his 1965 book *Techniques of the Selling Writer*, which has since undergone multiple reprints. I found this technique in Jack Bickham's 1999 book *Scene and Structure*.

That being said, it doesn't seem to be particularly prevalent in the how-to literature. This technique is pure gold and I sure wish it were described more.

So here I am, ready to do so.

STORY BASICS

Remember that a story can be defined as having a goal, stakes, and obstacles.

The story goal is the thing your hero pursues throughout your story. At the end of the story, it is completely clear whether your hero has or has not achieved the story goal.

The stakes refer to why it's so important for the hero to attain the story goal. Good writers create multiple stakes and escalate them throughout the story.

The obstacles, especially the villain, block the hero from attaining his goal. The obstacles allow the hero to grow so that he can creatively solve story problems and then triumph.

While styles and techniques vary, in general there are about 40-60 scenes in a novel.

SCENE

In the Scene-and-Sequel technique, each scene can be thought of as a mini-story with three parts that are similar to the story components:

- Scene Goal
- Scene Conflict
- Scene Disaster

Right before you write your scene, you can put this outline at the top of the page and fill it out. Taking five minutes to pre-plan your scene will help you to focus its progression and eliminates writer's block.

Scene Goal

For each scene you must formulate a specific, extrinsic goal that will be clearly attained, or not attained, by the end of the scene. This goal must be important to your hero (stakes) in his quest to solve the overall story goal.

For example, suppose your hero needs to clear his friend's reputation. Then this scene's goal might be to retrieve a paper from the bad guy's desk that will give his friend an alibi.

Your hero's goal must be clearly stated in one sentence at the beginning of the scene. For example, you could open your scene by writing:

Tom had to find the paper that would prove Evan was innocent, and he only had ten minutes before George would return.

Did you notice the ticking clock? These are always fun to include.

This sentence may sound too obvious to you, but trust me, it isn't. It helps your reader to focus on what to pay attention to.

Scene Conflict

The scene conflict takes the major portion of your scene. This is the back-and-forth interplay that is so compelling for your reader because it prolongs the uncertainty of how the scene goal will be answered.

Conflict occurs when your hero encounters obstacles to fulfilling his scene goal. These obstacles can be internal or external.

Internal obstacles are things like fear and lack of knowledge.

External obstacles are things like people or terrain.

Scenes usually have about four obstacles. The good news is that stories typically deal with one obstacle at a time. This means you don't have to construct complex interweaving of problems as you go to answer the scene question—just solve one obstacle, then move onto the next.

So for our scene outline at the top of the page, you might list conflicts as:

- Get past the secretary
- Get into George's office
- Recognize and copy the paper
- Get out

You can make this scene quick, or lengthen it by adding obstacles to one or more stages of the conflicts.

For example, you might write:

Tom had to find the paper that would prove Evan was innocent, and he only had ten minutes before George would return.

Cathy, the secretary, was away from her desk so he made it quickly past the outer room into the office hallway.

George's office door was the old-fashioned kind with a heavy turn lock. Tom would have to rig a way to catch the latch. He dug in his pocket, looking for the slim piece of metal he'd grabbed earlier. Rats. Where had the lock-pick gone?

One minute gone.

Here it was. He fiddled with the lock, feeling the small give of each tumbler as he was able to push them up. One at a time. Finally, the lock snicked and he pushed the door open.

Tom knew that George might have a pressure alarm on the desk, but he'd worry about that when he got there. First, he had to cross the room past the surveillance camera.

Scene Disaster

At the end of the scene, there are two, and only two, acceptable answers to the scene question:

● Yes, But…
● No, and Furthermore…

These answers allow you to hook this scene to the next one, making your reader wildly curious to find out what happens.

The YES, BUT answer gives an affirmative answer, but a negative consequence as well.

For example, in our scene question: Will Tom find the paper in time? You answer it: YES Tom finds the paper, BUT Cathy sees him take it. This answer leads to the scene

question in the next scene: *Will Tom be able to convince Cathy not to tell George about taking the paper?*

The NO, AND FURTHERMORE answer makes the situation even worse. For example, you ask: Will Tom find the paper in time? You answer the scene question, NO Tom doesn't find the paper, AND FURTHERMORE he triggers an alarm on George's desk that alerts the police to arrest Evan. This answer leads to the scene question in the next scene: *Will Tom be able to warn Evan to get away before the police arrive?*

Note that Tom was responsible for the bad consequences in both examples.

If you answer the scene question with a flat "Yes" or "No" you will be in trouble. The "Yes" answer stops the forward momentum of the action so you have nowhere to go. The "No" answer means that this whole scene is unnecessary and should be removed.

SEQUEL

The sequel is easy to neglect. However, without the Sequel, your reader won't feel your characters' emotions and desire for the story goal, and thus will disengage.

The sequel describes your character's internal reaction to the last scene's disaster. The sequel can be short—only a line—or an entire section itself. Often sequel reactions are interspersed within an ongoing scene to highlight the emotional consequences of exciting outer scene events.

Like the scene, the full-blown sequel takes place in a stereotyped sequence. This entire sequence is sometimes not described in the final draft but is still helpful to work out before you start so you the writer know what's going on.

The Sequel can be divided into four distinct parts:

● Emotion

● Thought

● Decision

● Action

Emotion

The emotion portion of Sequel describes your hero's emotional reaction to the previous scene's disaster: fear, anger, worry, grief, or whatever.

For example, Tom's disastrous search for the paper in George's desk leaves him anxious that he's going to be caught in the next few minutes.

Thought

After your hero calms himself, he looks at his options. An effective technique is to use the dilemma—two (or more) choices, all bad. Have your hero consider each choice and articulate the good and bad consequences of each potential action.

For example, Tom might decide he has three options.

1. He can pretend his being in George's office was due to a wrong turn and hope Cathy doesn't follow up to tell George.
2. He can let the chips fall where they may and just get out of there.
3. If Tom can convince Cathy to come with him, he can show her his evidence and hope she switches to his side. The negative is her absence might trigger a red flag to George.

Decision

Your hero must decide what he's going to do. This decision needs to be clearly stated, either here and/or at the beginning of the next scene as the Scene Goal. This cliffhanger tempts your reader to "read just one more chapter" to find out quickly what your hero will do.

For example, Tom might decide to take Cathy with him if he can, since she could be a powerful ally.

Action

Your hero moves to take the first action of his decision. This fourth part is often not present in the sequel, but waits for the start of the next scene.

Tom turned away from the desk and nearly jumped when he saw Cathy standing in the doorway. Busted.

Cathy smirked at him. "You set off the alarm. What are you doing here?"

Everything was lost. He saw it now—jail time for him with breaking and entering. Loss of his family. Evan thrown to the wolves.

Cathy was already dialing her phone.

Don't panic. Deep breath.

Think.

What possible reason could he give her to explain why he was here? He could tell Cathy he'd entered the wrong office by mistake, but it was unlikely she'd believe that with a locked door. He could just make some excuse and walk out of there, but she was not going to let that go.

No, no, no.

"Stop," he said. "Put your phone down. Can I show you the truth of why I need to help Evan? It'll just take a few minutes."

Tom noticed Cathy's mouth tighten. Then she nodded.

The next scene goal might be, then, to meet in the cafeteria so he can show Cathy the evidence in his briefcase.

CONCLUSION

The Scene-and-Sequel technique works to generate tension because it focuses your writing into small steps that keep leading to the next step. Your reader can easily follow your narrative and feel your hero's emotions and why each step is so critical. Even though your reader probably won't consciously recognize this structure, the story will resonate because it's not confusing.

This technique is truly magical. Once you learn it, you will find that your story comes into tight focus with clear direction that builds tension from the start till the exciting climax.

Amy Deardon is an award-winning writer of fiction and nonfiction. She is also a story coach and a publisher, and is a regular speaker at writing conferences. You can find her at http://www.amydeardon.blog.