

# EXPANDED SCENE STRUCTURE

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## ACTION SCENE STRUCTURE:

### BEGINNING:

The opening of each scene has to **orient** us to the context, show us the crucible in which the character will be tested. Anchor us to your world as the character experiences it. That is, it must show us the world we are in. Are we struggling through a desert, sipping coffee in a mall, or hurtling through space? For the reader to be immersed in the story, they need to see, feel, touch, hear, and taste the environment. **The reader needs to know where they are, what time of day or night it is, and the environment through which they are passing.**

Your opening should then include the following:

- **Orientation**—this is the crucible where the conflict takes place

In the **first paragraph** or so, you have to establish all of the following:

- **POV**—From whose perspective (or point of view) are we experiencing this scene?
  - POV must be clear from the beginning and reinforced constantly.
  - Even if you only have a single POV character, you still need to reinforce the POV constantly.
  - To reinforce, you use physical/sense impressions, thoughts, emotions, verbal statements of intentions, etc.
  - Do not head hop
  - Do not slip into omniscient narrator
  - If you change POV, you **MUST** change scenes
- **Location**—Where are we? If writing fantasy you will need to engage in significant world-building. For earthly locations give us a country, region, city, town, etc.
  - **Best given from the POV's point of view.** Have them react to their location. Use this to characterize your POV.
- **Time**—include the season, the time of day or night.
- **Environment**—are we on a snow-covered peak, trekking across the surface of mars, in a Victorian salon with our love interest? Your scene should affect the plot as your character moves through it. Weather, animals, pests, geography? **Your characters should respond emotionally to that environment.**
- **Hook**—Every scene needs something to snag the reader's attention. This can be an omen of things to come; a change or threat that has just happened, is going to happen, or is happening. One of the most effective ways to do this is to begin your scene as close to the moment of change as possible.

## MIDDLE:

- **Goal**—Your action scene also must establish the character’s goal unequivocally. This goal must be clear, specific, and obtainable. The character should also either declare the goal, think about it, paraphrase it, or imply it early in the scene.  
There are only three types of goals:
  - **possession** (i.e. the boy, the girl, the treasure, love, security, honor, information, power, etc.)
  - **relief** (escape from fear, pain, or danger, blackmail, domination, etc.)
  - **revenge** (for loss, betrayal, perceived slight, loss of honor, etc.)
- **Conflict/opposition**—The goal is absolutely essential to every scene because the **conflict** that is the life’s blood of your story can only happen as someone or something opposes your character’s goal.

The **opposition** can be your antagonist, the environment, some other character, even one of your protagonist’s friends or allies. You can create conflict by giving your characters conflicting goals and having them hammer out their differences during the scene. You can also do this by having your characters misunderstand each other.

The goal and the conflict set up the scene question “**can the POV succeed in achieving her goal?**”

The scene question should be a smaller question that feeds into the larger story question you established in the opening of your book.

You should **vary your conflict**. Have some that are internal and some that are external.

### Types of Conflict:

- **Human vs human**
- **human vs nature**
- **human vs society**
- **human vs. god**
- **human vs self**

### ➤ **Stakes:**

Your scene also needs obvious **stakes**. James Scott Bell argues that the only stake worth writing about is death.

There are only three kinds of death:

- **Emotional/psychological death:** Emotional or psychological death would occur when your character faces the potential of psychological collapse or the loss of something dear that they value more than anything else such as a love partner or job.
- **Social death:** Social death would occur when the character faces the potential loss of honor, status, or social position.

- **Physical death:** Physical death is pretty self-explanatory.

With the threat of emotional, social, or physical death hanging over your character's head, you can raise the stakes by bringing those stakes closer and making them more threatening.

➤ **SUES—Something Unexpected in Every Scene**

Another trick I picked up from James Scott Bell is what I call SUES. Somewhere in the middle or the end of your scene you need to add something **unexpected**. This can be the introduction of a new threat, a new question, etc. This is a way to keep your scenes fresh and interesting. If everything in your scene is predictable, your story will fall flat. You need to surprise the reader to keep them interested.

➤ **Motion:**

It is also crucial to keep your character in **motion**, even if the scene is mostly dialogue. A scene where your character sits still and thinks or where two talking heads do nothing but banter has no forward motion. It is static. Uninteresting. When characters are sitting still, give them something to do, chopping wood, drinking tea, jogging, etc. We do this by adding action beats to the scene.

**ENDING:**

**Disaster/transformation:**

The end is where you drive the reader to crave the next scene. The way to do this is to close the scene with a **disaster** or **transformation** of some kind. It should be a logical, yet unanticipated catastrophe or development that points to the future. If you can subvert the reader's expectation by giving them something other than what they thought would happen, so much the better. We call this a twist.

There are lots of ways to craft an ending that engages your readers.

You can have your character **gain new information** somehow—either someone tells them or because they figure it out on their own.

Your character can **receive unexpected news** or have someone come or go that changes the stakes for your character.

You can **give a simple pastime a feeling of foreboding** or have a “**ticking clock**” **suddenly appear that raises the stakes for your protagonist. Death, physical or emotional injury, looming danger, or a catastrophic mistake on the part of the hero.**

**A long-time favorite of some writers is the cliffhanger.**

**If you choose to do this, use it sparingly as it can get annoying and feel like a ploy to force the readers to keep reading. Of course, all writing is about manipulating reader's emotions. But readers don't like to notice that they are being manipulated.**

**There are two other things to remember about cliffhangers. Don't just put a chapter break in and then start right where you left off. That is too mechanistic, and readers will wonder why you stopped when you did. Also, avoid using the old worn-out "if I had only known," cliffhanger. It doesn't work.**

The key thing to remember about the ending of your scene is that the **protagonist needs to fail to achieve their goal**. If they succeed in their overarching goal, then your story is over. For this reason, you need to check that your answer to the scene question "will the protagonist succeed" is one of three, and only three answers—"no" (POV failed, battle continues); **yes, but**"; (POV succeeds but new complications arise) or **"no and furthermore."** (POV fails and her failure makes things worse).

You should avoid the **"and then"** ending because it is a mere continuation of the preceding scene and does not drive the story forward.

➤ **Prompt/Curtain line:**

To wrap up your riveting scene, provide a solid **prompt** that encourages the reader to jump to the next scene. Dwight Swain calls this a **curtain line**. It is the last line of the scene that sets the tone, raises stakes, or adds resonance.

It can be a moody or ominous description, an introspection filled with fear or worry. It can also be snappy dialogue or even the arrival of a new danger.

Think of it the way the hosts at the old showings of movies would use a one or two-liner that grabbed our attention and kept us in our seats anxious for the next act. You want the prompt to set and hold the emotional tone you want the reader to take away from your scene.

## **REACTION SCENE STRUCTURE:**

### **BEGINNING:**

Like the action scene, your reaction scene needs to **begin** by providing the context or

➤ **Orientation**

- POV
- Location
- Time of day
- Environment
- Hook

Just as you would in an action scene.

### **MIDDLE:**

Once we are securely in a time, place, and POV, we need to see the

- **character react** to the disaster.
- We need to see and feel their **emotion**.

The length and intensity of that emotion should be true to the character and the kind of story you are writing. **For example**, a schoolteacher with no military or martial arts experience is

going to have a very different emotional response to killing a man than a highly trained and experienced Navy Seal.

- We need to experience the character wrestling with the **dilemma or quandary** in which the character now finds herself.
- They will **review** what happened and what it **means**,
- consider their **options**,
- and search for a **new course of action**.

Give the character at least **two options** for solving the problem as they search for a new course of action.

#### **ENDING:**

Then show us their

- **decision** and how they arrived at it.
- Once the decision is made, the character now has a **new goal**
- and should begin **acting** upon their newly formed **plan**.
- Close the reaction scene with a **prompt or curtain line** that hints of danger or struggle in the same way you would an action scene.