

WHAT IS A SCENE?

The basic premise of the Book Architecture method is this: Your book has 99 scenes. If you find your scenes and put them in the right order, you will be all set. I don't believe this is easier said than done—or harder said than done. It is what it is. There will be periods of questioning and there will be periods of joy; there will be divine inspiration searing across the page like a cosmic flame, and there will be fidgeting with things until they fit just right. All I can say is that it does happen. I have seen writers line up their 99 scenes in the right order. When they do, the rest is just details.

When you start offering methods to people, their first question is: Does it work? This is not a formula, it is a method; as such, it needs to be applied. Does your book have exactly 99 scenes? I doubt it! Your book has 72 scenes, or 138 scenes, but you won't know until you are done. So I chose 99 for the sake of discussion. I chose it because it feels one shy of completion. You cannot achieve unity by presenting material that is comprehensive—you must present material that is consistent and coherent. There is an imaginary critic in everyone's mind against whose standards we must measure up. We need to adjust our definition of perfection to mean “getting your 99 scenes in the right order”—and let the 100th come when it is good and ready.

ACTION STEP: Make a list of every scene in your book without looking at your manuscript.

You will keep this list throughout: adding scenes, taking them away, highlighting which ones need to be improved—taking a break and improving a

particular scene—you will eventually use this list to reorder your scenes. For now, all you will do is generate the list. When you list your scenes, they do not need to be completely finished, either. Some may only exist in your mind. You might have a set of really good ideas that are still only sketched out in the briefest form. You may have rewritten that 400-page manuscript several times, but there may be something that still ails it. You may have written 100 or 200 pages and now you're shipwrecked.

The only rule is this: You cannot peek at the book itself. Make your list over a few days. Some scenes might come back to you in different environments, and that's great—keep the list with you as a reminder of your involvement with the narrative as a whole. You might feel that you will be able to remember every scene in your book. When you finish your list, however, you may find that you have forgotten scenes that are repetitive, tangential, or lacking any real impact. This is why the list must be made from memory, because it is the surest guide to the memorable.

I have discussed 99 scenes in the right order,¹ but I haven't really talked about what a scene *is*. Everything needs to be presented in a scene. Sometimes, you will have narrative material that links two different scenes, and a good link will belong as much to the passage above it as the one below it (Chapter 8 will discuss **links**). Even successful links have to be presented in a scene. Everything has to be in scene—scenes are how dramatic information is received.

“Show, don't tell” is a commonly used writing axiom.² It means *put us in the*

¹ Since debuting this method, I have been told that a similar idea can be found in a wide range of sources including Coleridge's definition of poetry as “the best words in the best order,” Swift's definition of style as “proper words in proper places,” and Yeats' formula of “the natural words in the natural order.”

² This was already a cliché 100 years ago. The earliest reference to “show, don't tell,” in the Western aesthetic tradition can be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*, 8.3, “While constructing plots and working them out complete with their linguistic expression, one should so far as possible visualize what is happening. By envisaging things very vividly in this way, as if one were actually present at the events themselves, one can find out what is appropriate, and inconsistencies are least likely to be overlooked.”

scene. Don't tell us about it, don't tell us that it happened, don't tell us that they had this set of feelings about it; make it *happen* for us as readers or viewers of dramatic information.

Two related definitions of scene³ that have some currency are that 1. A scene is where something happens, and because something happens 2. Something changes in a way that propels the narrative. In chapters four through six, I will examine the way these changes can be charted through various **series**, constructed in a way that is rhythmically delightful and ultimately meaningful.

A scene is where something happens.

A scene is where something changes.

To these two definitions, let me add one more:

A scene is related to the central **theme** of the book.

Let me say here (for the first time, but most assuredly not the last): your book can only be about one thing. When I say a scene has to be related to the central theme of your book, I mean that your book can only have one theme. I'll never forget the particularly precocious student who asked me,

"What about two things? Can a book be about two things?"

"Yes," was my response, "provided that those two things are about one thing."

Applying these three definitions of scene to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Ugly Duckling*, we can see that the whole story is constructed of six scenes. Six is a number I feel I can defend, although there have been many lively conversations about why this short story couldn't have 32 scenes or 17 scenes, or perhaps more

³ The origin of the word "scene" is from the Greek *skein*. It refers to the shadow cast by the tent of the amphitheater where plays were performed. Literally: the backdrop of the theater.

reasonably, nine scenes. I have included two versions of *The Ugly Duckling* in Appendix A, with the first being a clean copy. (If you have never read it, or have not read it in the last ten years, I urge you to do so now. It will take you twelve minutes.) The second version bears a variety of notations including where each of these six scenes begin and end.

The reason why some students have lobbied for there being nine scenes instead of six is that the links are so skillful. Consider the following passage:

“I think I will go out into the wide world,” said the duckling.
“Oh, do so by all means,” said the hen.

(end Scene 4)

So away went the duckling. He floated on the water and ducked underneath it, but he was looked at askance and was slighted by every living creature for his ugliness. Now autumn came. The leaves in the woods turned yellow and brown. The wind took hold of them, and they danced about. The sky looked very cold and the clouds hung heavy with snow and hail. A raven stood on the fence and croaked “Caw, caw!” from sheer cold. It made one shiver to think of it. The poor duckling certainly was in a bad case!

(begin Scene 5)

One evening, the sun was just setting in wintry splendor when a flock of beautiful large birds appeared out of the bushes.

The linking paragraph binds scenes four and five together as if it were mortar between two bricks. I have drawn the bold line where I have to exclude the link from the scene. However, I could just as have easily drawn it where the dashed line is. If you cannot tell which scene a link belongs to, chances are it is a successful link. Because this link is so seamless, some readers have thought to identify it as its own scene, which it is not—for reasons I will explore below.

How else can you be sure that a certain set of pages or passages belongs to the same scene?

Scenes often occur in a single time period.

Scenes often occur in the same place.

Scenes often have one central subject matter.

Keep these three ideas in mind when you look at the individual scenes in *The Ugly Duckling*. It will give you a clearer sense of where one scene ends and the next scene begins.

“That is a monstrous big duckling,” she said. “None of the others looked like that. Can he be a turkey chick? Well, we shall soon find that out. Into the water he shall go, if I have to kick him in myself.”

(end Scene 1)

Next day was gloriously fine, and the sun shone on all the green dock leaves.

(begin Scene 2)

The separation between scene one and two above is relatively easy to detect, due to the time shift. The setting and characters remain the same, which allows the action to develop in a comprehensible way, because we are familiar with the surroundings. There is also a time shift that signals the transition from scene two to scene three:

He was in despair because he was so ugly and the butt of the whole duckyard.

(end Scene 2)

So the first day passed, and afterwards matters grew worse and worse.

(begin Scene 3)

So far, so good. But now, in addition to a time shift, there is a change in the quality of time. In scene three, time speeds up—instead of lasting a single day like scenes one and two, it lasts for an indeterminate period. The location of the scene

changes as well, from the “great dock leaves” to a marsh. A change in location can be a very useful tool for identifying where one scene shifts to another. Sometimes, the narrator or main character will actually travel from one scene to the other via a “transportation link” (types of links are discussed in chapter eight). A change in setting also marks the separation from scene three to scene four:

He ran across fields and meadows, and there was such a wind that he had hard work to make his way.

(end Scene 3)

Towards night he reached a poor little cottage.

(begin Scene 4)

(This is actually one of the more difficult scenic breaks for readers to locate, because by this point we are sufficiently engaged with the evolving narrative that we cannot effectively predict from scene to scene how many locales we will visit, who will appear, what action will transpire or what time period will be covered.)

The end of scene four and the beginning of scene five has already been presented above, but in this context, I would like to make one more observation about the axiom “show, don’t tell.” 19th century novels made great use of what Book Architecture calls the “representative actions link.” In this kind of link, a summary is presented by showing symbolic events, which are repeated over a larger period of time. This way of stitching scenes together: scene–summary–scene is not the same, however, as presenting a narrative that is: show–tell–show. Looking at this link again, (“So away went the duckling...”) we can see that it is dramatically presented with color, action, character, and feeling.

The final scenic break of the story occurs between scene five and scene six:

...the duckling flew out among the bushes and the newly fallen snow. And he lay there thoroughly exhausted.

But it would be too sad to mention all the privation and misery he had to go through during the hard winter. When the sun began to

shine warmly again, the duckling was in the marsh, lying among the rushes. The larks were singing and the beautiful spring had come.

(end Scene 5)

Then all at once he raised his wings and they flapped with much greater strength than before and bore him off vigorously. Before he knew where he was, he found himself in a large garden where the apple trees were in full blossom and the air was scented with lilacs, the long branches of which overhung the indented shores of the lake. Oh, the spring freshness was delicious!

(begin Scene 6)

Between scenes five and six, the time changes, the place changes and the central action changes. The whole vibe changes, and you have a scene that is not only formally different—it is *essentially* different from the scene that precedes it. Since individual scenes are distinct from each other, it is helpful to give each a name. Naming your scenes will be especially helpful during the editing process, as you will be moving scenes around and will no longer be able to rely on their original numbering for identification. A good name embodies the key elements of a scene: what happens, what changes, and how it relates to the theme. A good name will instantly bring you back to what that chapter is about.

In *The Ugly Duckling* I have assigned the following names to the six scenes:

1. The Shell Will Not Crack
2. Can't Make Him Over
3. What Sort of a Creature Are You?
4. Conversation in the Cottage
5. The Hard Winter
6. The Royal Birds

Before we leave our scenic analysis of *The Ugly Duckling*, I want to mention one other facet of Andersen's work: his scenes are all almost exactly the same length. Scenes one through six are, respectively: 645 words, 742 words, 599 words, 693 words, 626 words, and 514 words. While this no doubt contributes to the

rhythm of his story, such uniformity in scenic length is not necessary—or even very common. Sometimes a flashback scene can be done really well in a paragraph, and there are examples in literature where scenes are over 100 pages long.⁴

The important thing to understand is that a scene is not the same thing as a chapter. A chapter is a movement larger than a scene. There are also movements that are smaller than a scene, for example: a paragraph, a sentence, and a word.

In *The Book Architecture Method*, a scene is the basic measuring unit by which you will construct your manuscript. When these units are identified, they immediately become distinct. They can be moved, they are flexible, they can be expanded; they can be seen as weak or strong, as a hopeless aside or as the climactic scene after all; they can be put in a different order getting a very different result. They are what **unity** is truly made of:

unit + unit + unit + unit = unity

Grasping the scene as a unit will orient you through your material in a way that nothing else can.

ACTION STEP #1

Make a list of every scene in your book. Do not look at your manuscript.

You can make your list over a few days, as some scenes will come back to you in different environments, but make the list only from memory: this is the surest guide to identifying the most memorable & meaningful scenes. Give each scene a name that will bring you back to what that chapter is about.

⁴ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 110, for 5 scenes from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* that combined total almost 450 pages in length.