

Plotting the Scene

Whether you plot your book in advance or write by the seat of your pants, it's a good idea to know the elements in a scene before you write it.

First, what is a scene?

According to Jack M. Bickham's book *Scene & Structure*: "A scene is a segment of story action, written moment-by-moment, without summary, presented onstage in the story "now." It is *not* something that goes on inside a character's head; it is physical."

Mr. Bickham goes on to describe the pattern of a scene as:

1. Statement of goal
2. Introduction and development of *conflict*
3. Failure of the character to reach his goal, a tactical disaster

In other words, each scene takes place in real time—it's not a memory, it's not a character reflecting, and it's not a summary of events that took place at another time.

Decisions to make before writing the scene

I think most writers have an internal sense of story whether they plot, write a brief outline, or completely wing it. However, to avoid missing key story points along the way, you can plot your scene in advance. I plot all of my scenes before writing them. If plotting an entire book makes you uncomfortable, you could use this method if you're stuck and unsure what to write next.

Answer the following questions for the scene you are plotting.

1. Where does this scene take place?
2. What day and what time of day is it?
3. How long after the last scene does this take place?
4. Who is in this scene?
5. Which main character has the most to lose in this scene? This answer will decide from whose viewpoint the scene will be told. For maximum tension, write from the viewpoint of the character with the most to lose.
One of the popular "rules" of writing is to avoid head-hopping. This means that each scene will take place from one character's point of view. Other characters may be in the scene, but the reader will be experiencing the action from the point-of-view character. It's a personal call on your part if you choose to follow this. I prefer to write each scene from only one character's point of view because it clarifies the scene for me.
6. What is the mood of the viewpoint character?
7. What is the viewpoint character's goal in this scene? (What does he want?)
8. What is the viewpoint character's motivation? (Why does he want it?)
9. What is the viewpoint character's conflict? (Why can't he have it?)
10. How does this scene affect the character—what is his growth?

When you answer these questions, you're ready to write your scene. Remember to include the setting details (who, where, when) at the beginning of the scene, and state the scene goal early. Unless the scene takes place immediately after the previous one, the reader won't know three days have passed and the character is now in a deli unless these details are clarified up front.

Getting tripped up on the character's goal? It can be as simple as Jim wants to buy a cup of coffee. His motivation? He needs caffeine to think straight. His conflict? Before he enters the coffee shop, his mother bumps into him.

If you review the Jack M. Bickham's scene essentials from above, you'll see this fulfills the criteria.

Scene goal: Jim wants a cup of coffee

Introduction and development of conflict: His mother bumps into him, preventing him from entering the coffee shop.

Failure to reach goal: He does not get the coffee.

Obviously, to keep the reader interested, you would want this meeting to increase Jim's conflict and allow him to grow in some way. If this is just a nice meeting between mother and son, it probably does not belong in your book.

If you try plotting one scene and find it helpful, you might want to record all of your scene outlines in a spreadsheet. I use Microsoft Excel and include the following columns.

Scene POV Setting(char's) POV character's GMC Character's Mood? Char. Development? Growth? Chapter? Notes?

This allows you to keep track of how many scenes are in your book, how often each character's viewpoint is being used, if you've overused a setting location, if each scene has a clear goal, the reason for the goal, and a failure to meet that goal, the character growth and if you've missed any loose threads, and how many scenes are in each chapter. It also allows a place to jot key details in the notes section.

Whether you're stuck and only plot one scene, or you use this as a tool to plot all of your scenes, I hope this serves to enrich your writing and move your story along.

For more information about Jill or more articles like this, go to www.jillkemerer.com.