

HOW TO WRITE A SCENE

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ASK → WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN IN THIS SCENE?

Many screenwriting books will tell you to focus on what the characters want. This is wrong. The characters are not responsible for the story. You are. If characters were allowed to control their scenes, most characters would choose to avoid conflict, and movies would be crushingly boring.

The question is not, “What could happen?” or “What should happen?” It is only, “What needs to happen?” If you wrote an outline, this is the time to look at it.

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ASK → WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THIS SCENE GOT OMITTED?

Imagine the editor messed up and accidentally left out this scene. Would the movie still make sense? If the answer is yes, then you don't really need the scene, and shouldn't bother writing it.

“But it's so dramatic!” you say. “But it's so funny!”

Tough. Put that drama or that comedy into scenes that are crucial to the movie. One thing you learn after a few produced movies is that anything that can be cut will be cut, so put your best material into moments that will absolutely be there when it's done.

3

ASK → WHO NEEDS TO BE IN THE SCENE?

Scripts are often clogged with characters who have no business being there. But because words are small, it's easy to overlook that “Haversmith” hasn't said or done anything for five pages. If he's not doing anything, get rid of him.

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ASK → WHERE COULD THE SCENE TAKE PLACE?

The most obvious setting for a scene is generally the least interesting, so don't be too quick to set your scene in the police bullpen, a living room or a parking garage. Always consider what the characters could be doing, even if it's not directly related to the focus of the scene. A father-and-son bonding moment at a slaughter house will play differently than the same dialogue at a lawn bowling tournament.

5

ASK → WHAT'S THE MOST SURPRISING THING THAT COULD HAPPEN IN THE SCENE?

Give yourself permission to step away from your outline and consider some wild possibilities. What if a car smashed through the wall? What if your hero choked and died? What if a boy vomited up a finger?

Most of your scenes won't have one of these out-of-nowhere aspects. But your movie needs to have a few moments that are completely unexpected, so always ask yourself, could this be one of them?

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ASK → IS THIS A LONG SCENE OR A SHORT SCENE?

There's nothing so dispiriting as writing a great three-page mega-scene and realizing that you could have accomplished just as much in two-eighths of a page. So ask yourself up front: How much screen time am I willing to give this scene?

7

BRAINSTORM THREE DIFFERENT WAYS IT COULD BEGIN.

Based on how the previous scene ended, there's often a natural image or line of dialogue which would be perfect to open the scene. But don't stop at the first option. Find at least three ways to start.

8

PLAY IT ON THE SCREEN IN YOUR HEAD.

At least 50% of screenwriting is simply sitting there with your eyes closed, watching the unwritten scene loop in your head. The first couple of times through, it's really rough: a blocking rehearsal. But eventually, you start to hear the characters talk to each other, and the vague motions become distinct actions.

This "looping" process is crucial. Don't rush this step. Let the scene percolate. Mumble the dialogue. Immerse yourself as fully into the moment as you can.

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WRITE A SCRIBBLE VERSION.

A "scribble version" is essentially a cheat sheet so you'll remember the great scene you just saw in your head. Don't write sentences. Don't write full dialogue. It shouldn't take more than five minutes. Just get the bare minimum down so that you won't forget the scene in the next hour as you're writing it.

I generally hand-write a scribble version in tiny print—sometimes literally on the back of an envelope—but you can also type. This is an example:

DUNCAN waiting edge of seat
ITO I was one of the doctors who worked on your wife
accident
injuries severe, trauma team, sorry, couldn't save her
(sits, reflex)
nature of injuries, concern fetus wouldn't survive in utero. paramedic able deliver caesarian boy healthy
(nodding not hearing)
nurse can take you to see him, know a lot to handle
what
a lot to handle
take me to see him? who? / Your son / My wife was never pregnant

This wouldn't make sense to anyone but me. But that's fine. The scribble version is only there so you don't get lost or confused while writing the full version of the scene. Yes, it's finally time to...

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WRITE THE FULL SCENE.

If you typed up the scribble version, don't just try to fatten it out. Start clean. The scribble version is deliberately crappy, and rewritten crap is still crap.

The scribble version is your outline for the scene. Yes, allow yourself the chance to detour from your scribble version if a truly better idea comes along. But if you've really spent the time to play it through in your head (#8), it's probably on the right track already.

Depending on the nature of the scene, getting the dialogue right may be most of the work. Regardless, focus on choosing the best words to describe the characters, the action and tone, so your readers will see the same scene in their heads.

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REPEAT.

Most movies consist of about 200 scenes, so you'll have plenty of opportunity to practice.

