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Ways to Create

GREAT SCENES

by Marilyn Horowitz

In my NYU class, Creating Great Scenes, I teach writers to write compelling, well-crafted scenes. I developed the class because I saw that writers needed techniques that would give them specific exercises to do when they were beginning a new screenplay or were stuck somewhere in a current one. This article will take you through a series of techniques from the class that will help you write great scenes.

Before learning something new it is useful to review the basics: All good drama is made of conflict that rises to a climax, and the scene is the unit of dramatic writing that allows us to present that conflict. In order for conflict to occur, something has to happen so that the characters are forced to react. This reaction causes a crisis that forces the characters to act. Dialogue is added to reveal the characters' thoughts and what they want to win in the scene. It's important to remember that it's the characters' reaction that causes the crisis, rather than just the event. These scenes are then strung together in a strategic way to create the three-act structure of a traditional screenplay. Keep these ideas in mind as you practice the following techniques:

TECHNIQUE #1: FINDING THE THREE LEVELS OF CONFLICT

Human beings are complicated, to say the least; so here is a way to understand that complexity so that your scenes can have greater depth and richness. While characters operate on many levels, finding these three levels for each one will help you write great drama. To find the three levels of conflict for each main character, ask yourself these three questions:

What is his inner conflict?

Inner conflict is what drives a character's actions even though we can't see it onscreen. For example, in *The Godfather* Michael (Al Pacino) is torn between having his own non-Mafia life and being part of the family. In *Spider-Man 2*, Peter (Tobey Maguire) thinks he must choose between giving up being Spider-Man to have love with Mary Jane or being Spider-Man—alone.

What is his external conflict?

This is the plot of your story, what is going on onscreen. In *The Godfather*, Michael's father is shot by Barzini (Richard Conte), the drug dealer. Michael must kill him and others to save the family. In *Spider-Man 2*, Peter must battle Dr. Octavius, a former mentor, to prevent the destruction of the city.

What is the Societal Conflict?

The societal conflict takes place onscreen on a larger playing field than the external conflict. *The Godfather* is set in an America that is intent on wiping out organized crime. Michael's conflicts are not only about his personal issues of self versus family—when he decides to save his father's life, Michael must choose on which side of the law he is going to be. In *Spider-Man 2*, Peter must choose between saving the world or having a normal life with Mary Jane.

TECHNIQUE #2: SEEING YOUR SCENE AS A PART OF A SEQUENCE

One way to write a great scene is to consider it as part of a larger sequence in your movie.

A sequence is a series of scenes that address a specific idea or question. For example, the wedding sequence in the opening of Act One of *The Godfather* introduces the world of the story. The “Will Harry get Sally?” sequence in the third act of *When Harry Met Sally* leads us to the climax of the movie.

Each scene in these sequences is equally important because it reveals new information about both plot and character. Because films are stories told in time, every scene must push the action forward. Consider the opening sequence in *Moonstruck* which answers the question, “Who is Loretta?”

The scenes that make up that sequence in *Moonstruck* are:

Loretta goes to the funeral home director. (She's a bookkeeper.)

Loretta goes to the flower store, and the owner gives her a rose. (She's a closet romantic.)

Loretta meets Johnny for dinner. He proposes to her and she accepts. (She has a man.)

Loretta drives him to the airport and demands a wedding date. (She was unlucky in love, a widow, and wants to change her luck. The wedding will be in one month, and Johnny has a brother from whom he is estranged.)

Loretta sees him off and listens to an old lady curse the plane. (She realizes she may have made a mistake.)

Working in sequences helps us know how much exposition should go into each scene without slowing the story down.

TECHNIQUE #3: HEIGHTENING THE CONFLICT IN ANY SCENE

Having two events going on simultaneously is an easy way to make any scene exciting. The main event is the scene between the two characters; and the second event should interrupt the first, creating tension. For example, in *When Harry Met Sally*, when Harry (Billy Crystal) tells Jess (Bruno Kirby) about how his wife left him, they are also watching a baseball game and are deeply involved in its outcome. The two friends cheer and boo the events in the game which allows for some necessary comic relief to punctuate the recitation of the sad tale of the divorce.

In *Spider-Man 2*, Peter declares his love to Mary Jane while he's trying to battle Dr. Octavius so that he can save the world. Mary Jane is in mortal jeopardy as a huge wall falls and is about to crush her when Spider-Man catches it—and then admits that he does love her, just in case they are both killed. This otherwise corny declaration of love is heightened by the danger.

The scale of the second event can vary, but the juxtaposition of the two will create an amazing degree of conflict.

TECHNIQUE #4: CREATING SUBTEXT WITH EASE

Subtext is the conflict between what the characters want and what they really need. The key is that your main character must be committed to what he wants, but you as writer must know the truth. The dramatic arc in any good film should be that the character starts off fighting for what he wants. The events in the film should force him to wake up to his real needs and act upon them.

If you know this information about your characters, the subtext will shine through. Use dialogue to show what your characters want and action and body language to show what they need. An easy way to tap into that is to ask yourself these two questions: First, ask “What does my character want?” Then, “What does my character need?”

In *Casablanca* Rick says, “I stick my neck out for nobody,” but the first thing he does is to hide the letters of transit at great personal risk. He says one thing but does another. Throughout the film he protests that he has no feelings; but by the end of the film we know that he has feelings, strong ones, and is willing to act on them.

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In *As Good As It Gets*, Melvin wants to be left alone and is openly rude and insulting; but underneath, he is desperate to find love, as revealed in the scene where he is forced to baby-sit the dog he earlier cursed and threw down the mail chute.

TECHNIQUE #5: HOW TO USE BACKSTORY IN A SCENE WITHOUT A FLASHBACK

The traditional approach to revealing backstory is to use a flashback. For example, in *Casablanca* after Rick sees Ilsa, he gets drunk and has a flashback about being in Paris with her, which reveals their history together. Another approach is what I describe as “bringing the past into the present.” In *When Harry Met Sally*, Harry and Sally are shopping at The Sharper Image™ on a Saturday afternoon when Harry’s ex-wife shows up shopping with her new husband. We have been hearing about her throughout the movie; but, instead of the traditional approach of revealing the story in flashback, we actually meet the wife in the scene, which is what brings it to a climax. Using the past, represented by Harry’s ex-wife, as a part of the scene gives the viewer an opportunity to understand how the character feels about this event without stopping the forward movement of the story.

TECHNIQUE #6: GIVING YOUR CHARACTER A LITTLE EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE

Every scene you will ever write comes after something else has happened. Knowing the events that occurred just before the scene you are actually about to write can really help juice it up. We are accustomed to knowing our characters’ histories from birth to present, but the immediate emotional baggage our characters carry around in their daily lives can be fodder for creating a great scene. A bad travel experience for our character on the way to an important love scene can really heighten the conflict. This is a technique you can use anytime you write. In fact, physically writing this emotional baggage scene isn’t necessary—just spend a minute or two deciding where each character was before they meet in a scene. Very often this material ends up in the screenplay because it reveals what is missing in your story.

An example of an emotional baggage scene that is in an existing film is the scene in *As Good As It Gets* where we see Melvin go to the restaurant where Carol works, and she isn’t there. Melvin has a tantrum, and he’s thrown out—forever. He bribes the busboy into giving him her address. In the climactic scene that follows, Melvin shows up at Carol’s place. She is about to take her son to the emergency room. Melvin demands she return to work. This scene is informed by what has happened to each of them before they are forced to be together. Finding the moment that happened before the scene you are about to write will add a strong emotional undercurrent to the action and help to push the plot forward.

TECHNIQUE #7: WRITING A SCENE FROM TWO POINTS OF VIEW

In life, we have an experience and then recount it. We actually have the experience twice. Why not give our writing the same break? Do a draft of your scene as if you were your main character experiencing the scene, then go back a second time and flesh it out.

For example, if you were creating or rewriting the scene in *Sideways* where Miles (Paul Giamatti) finds out that his ex-wife is getting remarried, and you weren’t sure how the scene would build to an emotional crescendo, you could try writing a quick pass from Miles’ point of view. Your first attempt might read something like this:

“Jack and I had stopped the car to look at this vineyard. I was humoring him, but I was still having a great time being miserable. Then Jack told me Vicky was getting married. I went bugshit. ‘Get away from me,’ I screamed and then grabbed a bottle and ran off. I jogged until I had finished the bottle and ran out of breath.”

Having spent a few minutes creating the scene from Miles’ point of view and then laying out the emotional beats and action based upon his monologue, writing the scene would be easy.

You could then repeat the process for Jack and would find that his version was quite different. Putting these two renditions of the same events together can produce some really fascinating and great scene work.

There is always a natural emotional rhythm that emerges when a character retells an event. Tuning into this emotional rhythm

or “beats” can help us shape our scenes in fresh and original ways.

TECHNIQUE #8: WRITING BETTER DIALOGUE

If you know what your characters want from each other, you will know what they need to say. The scene begins when one character makes his first attempt to get the other character to give him what he wants and ends when he either wins or loses. Think of dialogue in terms of verbs, preferably action verbs. Ask yourself what the series of verbal and physical actions your characters will use to get what they want will be. By using dialogue as if it were action and knowing a great scene must rise to a crisis, you can write amazingly good dialogue in your first draft.

In the famous scene in *Casablanca* where Ilsa comes to Rick's place late at night, her objective is to get the letters of transit at any cost. She pleads with him to give her the letters, begs him, cajoles him, insults him and finally threatens him with a gun.

You can see what Ilsa has to do to try to persuade Rick. She tries at least five different ways to get him to give her the letters. So, the next time you get a note back that your script seems “too easy,” the cause may well be that your characters don't have to fight hard enough for what they want. This want should always be directed from one character to another character in the scene. Ilsa wants the letters of transit from Rick.

Always use action verbs like “insult” rather than “vilify.” It's easy to imagine Ilsa calling Rick a selfish coward but hard to imagine how she would act in order to vilify him.

So, to write better dialogue know what your characters want, from whom they want it and what action verbs they will use to get it. The right words will flow.

TECHNIQUE #9: USING PLACE TO CREATE A GREAT SCENE

Use an unexpected place to set your scene. The love scene on the train in *North By Northwest* is a classic example of how place can heighten a scene or a sequence. The kidnapping scene in the trunk in *Out of Sight* between Jack (George Clooney) and Karen (Jennifer Lopez) is another interesting and original choice. Sometimes it's realizing that you have set your scene in the wrong location. For example, you've

written a fight between siblings that needs to climax in a fistfight in a public place; but, your characters are very proper and concerned with appearances. You will have to force something that could be organic if you just reset the scene in one of their living rooms. Sometimes use of place can create humor, like the scene in *When Harry Met Sally* where she fakes an orgasm in the deli. If your scene isn't great, consider changing the place.

TECHNIQUE #10: USING PROPS TO IMPROVE YOUR SCENES

The use of props can take a scene right to greatness. Consider the paperweight in *Citizen Kane*, and Kane's dying word, “Rosebud.” While it's fine for a prop to seem like a random choice, it shouldn't be. Everything has to feed the story. The paperweight in *Citizen Kane* is a symbol of Kane's childhood and a moment of happiness.

A classic use of props is when Charlie Chaplin eats his shoe in *The Gold Rush*. The shoe represents the last hope for Chaplin's hapless character.

A modern use of props occurs in *When Harry Met Sally* when Harry and Sally go to see their friends who are moving in

together. They are arguing about whether or not to keep a hideous wagon wheel table, which precipitates a complete meltdown and fight between Harry and Sally. The wagon wheel table represents a last bastion of Jess' bachelorhood, and giving it up is a symbol of his surrender to the married state.

The key to these 10 techniques is that they are based upon character. I've found that the number-one barrier to creating a great scene is that the writer doesn't understand his characters in the right way. My goal is to help you find ways to have such an intimate understanding of your characters that their dramatic arc is as apparent to you as if they were your friends. (1)

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