

Writing 3-D Scenes

A workshop with Linda S. Clare

Writers must master all sorts of skills, from learning how to best describe a character, to creating good dialogue to understanding grammar, spelling and usage. Whether you are writing fiction, memoir or creative nonfiction, it's my belief that the single most important thing a writer must do is to immerse the reader in a story. Even a lot of nonfiction comes to life when a story is presented. Most of us can always use better skills at scene writing, because scene writing is integral to helping the reader connect with the story. Tonight, I'd like to outline some ways you can get your reader so tangled up in your story that it's hard to put your writing down.

In movies, you need special 3-D glasses. While Hollywood is trying to cash in on the effects of watching objects appear to fly off the screen and into your lap, as writers we have an advantage over movies: we can enter the thoughts and emotions of our POV character. Movies must resort to dubbed-in narrators. So what does writing a 3-D scene look like?

I. Characters and Scenes

Create a Strong POV Character. A scene that is multi-dimensional begins with a strong POV Character. This person is passionate about something, does not go through life settling, or being content. NO. This character wants something like a doughnut addict wants a VooDoo bacon glazed. In order to make your character 3-D, know that character intimately. Know her outward stuff, sure. But find out what the character wants. Learn the character's secrets—the things your character is trying to hide. Your reader may not read a lot of this stuff, but you need to know and understand it.

Get Another Character On Stage. A scene can fall flat if the writer keeps the character alone on stage. Think of the movie "Castaway"—why did Tom Hanks' character need Wilson? Take a look at your stuff—do you see your POV character on stage with no one to talk to? If the character can't use dialogue and the interaction of a scene with others, that character is forced inside his head—to think us through the story feels confining, ruminative and is very difficult to do well.

Get Your Characters Moving. If you write many scenes where the actors are sitting around a table, eating and drinking, it may feel like real life. But real life is often boring. Get your characters off the chair and into action. When we sit around, the action is limited to mouths moving (dialogue) and the occasional lifting of the drink to the lips.

Make Every Scene Worthy. If you act out characters just shooting the breeze or doing mundane tasks like getting up, making coffee, showering dressing, you are wasting your effort. In every scene—and I mean every scene—you must tell a bit more of the story. That’s what is meant by “advancing the story.” No fair saying it adds color or charm. Unless it’s part of your story, don’t act it out.

II. Nuts and Bolts of 3-D Scenes

Choose Your Details. We all know we must describe the scene. The first and foremost of these is when and where the characters are meeting for the scene. If your reader loses these details, confusion reigns. I like to put the where/when as close to the beginning of the scene as I can get it. Use a broad brush to describe persons or objects.

Stop Chunkin that Punkin. One of the 3-D Scene’s worst enemies is the description chunk. You write a paragraph or more about the setting or other details and plunk it smack dab at the scene’s opening. The reader isn’t going to retain that chunk for long without rereading, though and by the time the characters begin dialogue, they’ve turned to talking heads. The background sights, sounds, etc. fade very quickly from a reader’s mind. Go ahead and draft a chunk. It’s OK. But don’t leave it there.

Weave Instead. If you see that your description and your action are separated, learn to weave your setting and other concrete sensory details around the action and dialogue. Remind your readers that Jane is sitting on the rug or pushing a lawn mower or dicing onions. Break up chunks (I define a chunk as anything over three or four sentences) and use them to remind your reader of the surroundings. This helps reduce the need for dialogue attributions, and keeps the entire (hence, 3-D) scene in the reader’s mind.

III. Three is a Good Number.

How Long Is the Scene? A good scene moves along, doesn't have a lot of pregnant pauses and if the writer needs a character to do something irritating, boring or repetitive, your job as the writer is to give the illusion of those things without making the reader suffer through a real example. So if a character is a small child who's whining and begging, you might not include all the exchanges between the parent and child. Only write enough for the reader to get the idea. If you really irritate, bore or otherwise annoy the reader, they'll tune out.

Welcome to the Rule of Three. A series of three is satisfying to the reader. Try using no more than 3 examples, lines of dialogue or other elements to monitor your pace. It's a guideline, but it works and keeps those chunks from rising from the dead.

Hone Your Dialogue Skills. If you have a great way of writing about the scene but then write stilted or unbelievable dialogue, the scene won't feel 3-D. Listen to the way people speak, use contractions, limit your use of dialect and learn the correct way to punctuate dialogue. Use the Rule of 3 to keep characters from speechifying or becoming talking heads.

IV. Manage The Drama Mama.

Beware the Cold Mashed Potatoes! A 3-D scene can quickly get hijacked by flashbacks, aka back story. What's your real-time scene doing while the character's mind "reels back?" If that character is dining on mashed potatoes and lifts a forkful to her mouth just as her mind reels back, then the longer she "remembers," the colder the mashed potatoes are going to be when she comes back to real time. Keep flashbacks brief as possible. The Rule of 3 comes in handy with this too.

Make An Emotion Thesaurus. For those "inner" moments, you'll quickly run out of ways to show an emotion without resorting to telly descriptors. Try making an Emotion Thesaurus, taking as many as you like and listing all the ways real people show their feelings. Collaborate with your writer friends or critique group to have more of a range. And please, no roving body parts!

Change the Camera Angle. If your scene has more than two players, refocus your “camera” at times so the reader doesn’t forget the ones who aren’t speaking as much. Cowboys playing poker.

V. Timing Is Everything.

Start Close to the Action. One of my writing mentors has this great story about a woman in a white evening gown who orders a glass of red wine. Her story (about how her gown and life were ruined) begins just as the bumbling waiter trips and the wine arcs out of the glass. Start your story just before the one thing happens that changes everything, aka the “inciting incident.”

Foreshadow and Withhold Info. You can go back and “plant” things so that when you reveal the story, the reader expects a logical development of those things. By withholding certain bits of info you create tension and maintain suspense. Twins’ story.

3-D Practice: Set-up, Build-up, Pay-off. Scene writing is like a joke. Your beginning is a set-up for the characters and the story promise or goal. The middle you must write scenes that are more and more tension, or rising in action. The pay-off is the CLIMAX scene, where the story goal’s outcome is revealed. You get better with practice. Practice writing scenes, lots and lots of scenes. With any luck your reader won’t even need any special glasses.