

Chapter 9 of *Guide to Writing the Mystery Novel: Lots of Examples, Plus Dead Bodies*, by Barbara Gregorich, ISBN 978-1500714482, may not be copied or reproduced without permission from the author. A list of all twenty-five chapters appears at the end of this chapter.

9 Summary, Scene, and Conflict

Novels are built through a series of scenes. These scenes are part of the plot and are thus connected by cause and effect. Plays are also built through a series of scenes. In fact, plays are all scene: dialogue and action in real time. Novels, however, are built not only through scenes, but also through summary or, as it's also called, narrative summary, or simply narrative. While on-stage drama has the power of scenes, novels have not only that power, but the additional breadth and depth that narrative summary gives. There's a slant or stand in novels that doesn't exist in plays: that slant comes through the narrative. (Throughout this book I'll use *summary* and *narrative* interchangeably.) The choice every novelist makes when writing is: Should I tell this part of the story in scene, or should I tell it in summary?

Conflict

A scene is a dramatic incident that takes place in real time, without interruption, usually in the same place. It usually involves two or more characters, it usually involves dialogue, and it always involves conflict. Always.

In writing classes and in critique groups I've found, to my initial surprise, that many people are averse to conflict. It appears they don't want people, even their own characters, to disagree. As a result of this learned aversion to conflict, these people either write boring scenes or they avoid scenes altogether and write mostly narrative summary.

When culture-instillers teach children that conflict is bad, they're doing it partly to protect the child from repercussions and partly to protect society from a person who insists on asserting his will at all times. But conflict, which is the lifeblood of scene, is present in every aspect of our lives.

That conflict can be minor. What do I wear to work today? I'm sick and tired of oatmeal for breakfast, let's have bacon and eggs! Should I shovel the front sidewalk now, or after I get home from work? Why am I always seated next to Zack, who bores me to death? We've never taken a mountain vacation — should we skip the beach this year and try the mountains?

Or it can be major. Do we form a union to fight for our jobs and health benefits? Should

we invest our savings in real estate or an IRA? What should I do about this man who's been following me for blocks? Either your brother finds his own place in the next two weeks, or I move out!

Conflict is part of life, from the moment we're born until the moment we die. Infants might want food, but can't express themselves: they are experiencing the conflict of wanting something but not getting it. Adults might know they need eight hours of sleep for good health and optimum performance, but at the same time they want to stay up late to watch a movie. Conflict, conflict, conflict.

Conflict can be good, bad, or even neutral, depending on the situation and the people involved. Whether you have oatmeal instead of bacon and eggs for breakfast could be a totally neutral conflict if you enjoy both meals and just can't decide between them. If your partner has been making you oatmeal for breakfast for the last two weeks and, despite your requests, will not stop serving you oatmeal, that could be a very bad conflict — one that might get worse as each of you expresses your wants.

The purpose of all the information about conflict is this: every scene must have a conflict, either small, medium, or large. Either good, neutral, or bad. Either explicit or implicit. If you write scenes that have no conflict, you will be writing scenes for no purpose. The reader will become bored.

The Purpose of Scene

The purpose of scene is to advance the plot and help develop characterization. Both of these are accomplished through conflict. Here's a scene from *Sound Proof*. It takes place the morning after the murder and after the sheriff has questioned Frank. The scene takes place at breakfast in the community dining hall.

Nola Grayson, sitting with Suzanne and me, added sugar and cream to her coffee, stirred it, and settled the spoon alongside the cup. "Mary and I have talked about Shelby's death," she said, "and while it is tragic that somebody has died at Midwest Music Madness, it's important for the festival to continue in the spirit intended. A spirit of fun, relaxation, friendship. And good music."

I nodded absentmindedly, wondering if I had missed any clue . . . Bliss smelling of cigarette smoke, Edric English fully dressed, the cut strings twisted around the red fiddle. . . .

" . . . do you agree?" Nola asked.

Suzanne prodded my thigh.

"Huh? Agree with what?"

"That we want the festival to be a positive experience for everybody, so we should proceed like we usually do."

"Sure," I said.

Nola nodded. "Good. That's what I told Aja, and so she wants to talk to you."

I stared blankly at Nola. "Aja Freeman?" I asked. "One of the cooks?"

"Yes," said Nola in exasperation.

"What about?" I asked.

Nola smiled and leaned forward as if we were conspiring. "Aja *really* wants to win the cooking contest this year, and she's got it into her head that more table space will help. Do you think you can build a table for the kitchen staff?"

Build a table. I thought about it for a long minute.

"Sure," I said at last. "That's what I'm here for," I lied, wondering if Mary had carpentry work planned for me every day. "I'll talk to Aja this morning."

The conflict in this scene is not a large one, certainly not as large as other scenes in the book (Frank's discovery of the body, the scene in which Frank discovers the blackmail note, the storm scene, the confrontation between Mary and Raven, and so on). Nevertheless, there *is* a conflict, and the scene does advance the plot and help characterize.

Nola Grayson wants Frank to build a table for the kitchen staff (Frank is still working undercover as a carpenter), but his mind is not even on the conversation: he's analyzing what he observed just a few hours ago when he discovered Stubbs' body. Nola wants Frank to build a table, Frank wants to solve the crime. This is the conflict. Despite what he wants to do (figure out who murdered Shelby Stubbs), Frank decides to continue his undercover role as carpenter. This reveals something about Frank's character: he takes his job seriously and so he continues working undercover. And he takes murder seriously, whether it's his job or not.

Nola's character is also developed in this scene: she takes the running of Mary's festival seriously. Despite the murder, she wants things to continue as "normal," and so she focuses on a very normal thing, the building of a needed table for the kitchen staff.

Suzanne's character is also developed in this scene. She is sitting next to Frank, and when it's clear to her that he has lost the thread of the conversation, she prods his thigh, a motion that most likely goes undetected at the long community tables. Suzanne doesn't want Frank to look inattentive, so she brings him back to the conversation at hand. But she doesn't do it by calling attention to his lapse . . . by saying something like, "Frank. Nola's speaking to you." Suzanne is helping Frank look good.

The scene above could be written without any conflict. Here's what it might look like:

Nola Grayson, sitting with Suzanne and me, added sugar and cream to her coffee, stirred it, and settled the spoon alongside the cup. "Mary and I have talked about Shelby's death," she said, "and while it is tragic that somebody has died at Midwest Music Madness, it's important for the festival to continue in the spirit intended. A spirit of fun, relaxation, friendship. And good music."

"Yes," I replied, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"We want the festival to be a positive experience for everybody, so we should proceed like we usually do," Nola continued.

"That makes sense," I said.

Nola nodded. "Good. That's what I told Aja, and so she wants to talk to you."

"What about?" I asked.

Nola smiled and leaned forward as if we were conspiring. "Aja *really* wants to win the cooking contest this year, and she's got it into her head that more table space will help. Do you think you can build a table for the kitchen staff?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll talk to Aja right after breakfast."

I hope you aren't enamored of the above scene, because it's totally uninteresting. There's no conflict at all. Because there's no conflict, the scene doesn't move the plot forward. Nor does it help characterize anybody.

If No Conflict, Then Summarize

If you find yourself writing bland scenes which contain no conflict, you can improve your story in one of two ways. If you sense that the scene is important to your story, then rewrite the scene so that it contains conflict and helps reveal character. Or, drop the scene and relay the information as narrative summary.

Here's what my scene might look like in narrative summary:

At breakfast Nola Grayson sat with Suzanne and me, mainly to inform me that she and Mary had talked over the murder and its ramifications for the festival, and that they both felt the festival should continue in the spirit intended.

Part of me listened to what Nola was saying. But only a small part. The larger part of my brain was occupied with whether I had missed any clues last night . . . Bliss smelling of cigarette smoke, Edric English fully dressed, the cut strings twisted around the red fiddle. . . .

When Nola got my attention again, she asked me to build a table for the kitchen staff. I thought about it and realized that working undercover as a carpenter might be helping the theft investigation. But it sure as hell wasn't helping the murder investigation — not if I had to spend time pounding together a table when I should be asking questions.

This narrative summary isn't, in my opinion, as interesting as the scene was. But it's perfectly acceptable as summary, and it does move the story forward. A choice that you as a writer will always be making is this: what to tell in scene, what to tell in summary. Sometimes your decision will be the correct one either way. This is especially true when not much is at stake.

If you find yourself presenting most of your book in narrative summary, however, you

need to reconsider your choice. Why are you choosing narrative summary, which avoids direct action and conflict, and instead tells the story in a second-hand manner? Readers crave drama, so it's up to you to give them the important parts of your story through scenes. It's up to you to decide what those scenes are.

Conflict Without Dialogue

Earlier in this chapter I said of scene: "It usually involves two or more characters, it usually involves dialogue, and it always involves conflict. Always."

You may wonder whether a scene can be built with perhaps only one character and no dialogue. Such scenes aren't common, but they do exist, and there's a time and place for them. Below is part of the long storm-rescue scene from chapter eighteen of *Sound Proof*. Frank has just stepped out of the barn and into the fierce storm in order to find and save Lafayette Wafer, who was last seen at the pole barn, which lies across the creek from the main barn.

The first four steps weren't that bad. Like stepping into a pugnacious, overweight waterfall. After that the wind whipped around the corner of the barn and bulldozed me in directions I didn't want to go. But mostly it came from the west and I was heading east, so for a while it simply impelled me forward.

Coming back would be the problem.

Even with the powerful flashlight in my hand, the path wasn't visible. Walls of water poured down, obscuring everything. I tried to run but couldn't, the wind shoving me everywhere. I fell, got up, was blown back down a couple of times. Being blown off my feet didn't bother me too much, at least not yet. What made my heart race harder was the fear of lightning. It crackled in the sky behind me as if deciding where to aim next.

Uncle Rudy's thunderstorm advice filled my brain. When out in the fields during a thunderstorm, never go near a tall tree that could attract lightning. Never stand upright. Never lie flat. Instead, crouch: present the smallest surface possible to the bolts from above. My sister and cousins and I would go around pretending we were running from lightning, our backs curved, our arms hanging loosely at our sides. We'd sway back and forth and huff-huff like apes.

Back then, it was funny.

Now it was damned awkward to run all hunched over, as close to the ground as possible.

The one-pound pork chop I had eaten cramped my stomach, making progress even more difficult. If I survived, I would not vote for Tansy Thompson as best cook.

The wind knocked me over again and I fought my way back up, trying to remember which direction I'd been heading. I chose what I thought was the right one, then looked back over my shoulder. At that moment Guy must have rolled the barn door open — a huge rectangle of light shown through the darkness. I turned my back on it, confident of my bearing.

Several minutes later I sensed something massive, as if it were sending out

vibrations. I looked up. The black walnut tree loomed, its branches whipsawing in the wind, its trunk swaying. The pole barn, then, was to my left.

I veered in that direction. I slogged through the swift creek, forgetting to crouch as I hurried against the rising water, which had already reached the pole barn. I clicked the flashlight button: a long beam of light picked up the barn wall. The door wouldn't slide open. I pulled and pushed and at last squeezed through an opening.

"Lafayette!" I shouted.

He stood in the far corner . . . on the little ladder nailed to the wall, his bowed psaltery case clutched to his chest.

The storm-rescue scene is one of the longer ones in the book: this excerpt represents only part of it. The paragraphs are here to show, first, that this is a scene, even though it does not, until the last two paragraphs, contain dialogue or even two characters.

So what makes this a scene and not narrative summary? First, it contains action. Second, that action is taking place as the scene progresses — in real time, not in summary. (Even though the story is told in the past tense, which is the most common way of writing fiction, the action is understood to be taking place as Frank relates it.) Conflict dominates the scene, even though it's not conflict between two or more people. Instead, it's conflict between a person and nature. Frank wants to make his way through the storm to the pole barn to bring Lafayette back to safety. Nature, always indifferent to humans, makes no accommodations to Frank's wishes. He and nature are in conflict. The storm is his obstacle. It will not back down or go away.

Some scenes can end in a stalemate. When that happens in a novel, the conflict will arise again, later in the book. Perhaps several more times, until the conflict is resolved one way or the other. But most scenes cannot end in a stalemate. The storm scene cannot. Either Frank will find Lafayette and bring him back, or the storm will prevent him from doing that. Either Frank "wins" or the storm "wins."

A book is created through a combination of scene and summary. The relationship between the two varies the rhythm and pace of the story. If you've just written a scene full of heavy conflict and intense stakes, the reader (and you!) could use the break of narrative summary before encountering another scene.

Determining which events to write as scene and which as summary is a learning experience. Even experienced novelists turn some scenes into summary during their rewrites, and some summaries into scenes. You, too, will consider these possibilities when you rewrite the first draft of your novel.

Contents:

***Guide to Writing the Mystery Novel:
Lots of Examples, Plus Dead Bodies***

Introduction

- 1 Plot, Character, and Setting**
- 2 Plot**
- 3 Naming Your Characters**
- 4 Developing Major Characters — Motivation**
- 5 Minor Characters**
- 6 Character Tags**
- 7 Setting, Including Scene of the Crime**
- 8 Point of View**
- 9 Summary, Scene, and Conflict**
- 10 Subplots**
- 11 Plot Complications**
- 12 Casting Suspicion**
- 13 Planting Clues**
- 14 Disguising of Motive, Means, and Opportunity**
- 15 Timelines**
- 16 Rising Action, Pace, and Pacing**
- 17 Exposition and Beginnings**
- 18 When to Introduce the Villain**
- 19 Foreshadowing**
- 20 Dialogue**
- 21 Description**
- 22 Solution and Denouement**
- 23 Outlining**
- 24 Rewriting**
- 25 Writing Well**

Index