

How to write the individual Scene – finding the scene’s dramatic core, its subtext etc

Hi All. This is some material written by me on how to write the individual scene. You are most welcome to use it yourself, but please do not copy to it other people or for your students without written permission from me because it is my copyright and I might want to put it in a book or article some time. Thanks. Hope it’s of use to you.

This material refers to my ‘development strategies’. See my book [*Screenwriting Updated: New and conventional ways of writing for the screen*](#)

As you are writing any scene, keep using Development Strategy 1 - **Define the task, then get the idea.**

Define the Task That is, ask yourself

Q. What am I supposed to be doing here?'

A. Writing a scene

Q. Which Scene?

A. Write a simple, short description of the scene so I know what I'm doing. Define the task again

Q. Okay, this is the scene I have to write, so what are the issues in writing any scene?

A. Repetition; control of backstory; subtext (making sure the dialogue is the tip of the iceberg and charting the characters' thought between speeches; best use of location (in terms of forwarding the drama), building towards the big dramatic moment (the dramatic core) getting into the heads of the characters etc etc.

Q. What are the specific advantages and disadvantages of this scene.

A. Try to pinpoint any problems or opportunities specific to this scene (eg if it's set in the toilets of a big hotel, how could you suggest bustle and other people nearby without using any more actors? How could the fact that it's happening in a hotel be used to maximise drama? eg people might overhear, so the characters' jeopardy increases and they have to keep their voices down, while feeling generally more pressured and embarrassed etc etc)

Finding a scene’s dramatic core

To find the scene's dramatic core, look for 'where the relationship changes' - that is, the instant where the biggest moment of drama is .. For example, the moment when the wife reveals to the husband she's having an affair; the moment when the butcher locked in the cold room gets told by his apprentice outside that he's leaving him in there for revenge etc.) At this moment both characters are very interesting to the audience - one has

confessed and is waiting for the response, the other has heard shocking news. This is the point at which the audience will sit up in their seats wanting more. Try to guide them towards it, editing the scene. You might want to get out of the scene at the moment, or you might want to stay and explore it. It depends on the scene and what you plan to do with it. Think about the benefits of both and choose.

Edit the scene again, checking for the steps in subtext.

NOTE You might only start to understand the subtext properly when you go back for the first edit. This often happens when you're in character. You end up pruning a lot of redundant bits.

Improving your skills in subtext Choose another of your scenes and write its emotional progression but don't put in the dialogue. It helps if you imagine these are people who are speaking in a foreign language, and you are just describing what you are picking up from the body language. Eg. 'She's standing outside the door terrified he'll leave, but it's coming over as anger. He's inside weeping but answering angrily and you can't hear the tears in his voice etc...She asks if he really wants her to go. He's gobsmacked, frightened, but too proud to let her know it, so he tells her to go jump etc etc.)