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## ACTS &amp; SCENES

*Acts & Scenes***Acts**

Western cultures favor stories with repetitions of three. *The Three Musketeers* is one obvious example, but the principle goes much deeper than that. Even childhood tales like *The Three Little Pigs* and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* barely scratch the surface. Almost every story you can think of uses repetitions of three to some extent. Jokes, anecdotes, advertising slogans, radio dramas, movies, short stories, novels—even urban myths—all rely on the power of three.

Why? It probably has to do with the economy of language. The first two repetitions of any story element are just enough to establish some kind of pattern, which means developing an expectation in the reader's mind. The third story element either breaks the pattern, and so creates surprise or humor, or it completes the pattern and creates a sense of satisfaction.

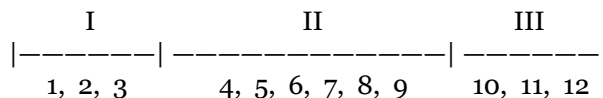
Here's an example of the first from Mark Twain: "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of congress. But I repeat myself." This is a funny line because the first two sentences make us think Twain is going to say something about congress. That expectation is fulfilled, but in an unexpected way, and we are both surprised and amused.

*Goldilocks* is an example of the satisfaction created by the third element fulfilling, rather than breaking, a story pattern. She first found Papa Bear's bed too hard, then found Mama Bear's bed too soft, then found Baby Bear's bed to be *juuust* right.

But in its most basic form, the power of *Three* is structural. Every story has a Beginning, a Middle and an End. Your audience expects as much; they expect to be given clues about when Beginning changes into Middle, and Middle becomes End.

Playwrights and screenwriters speak in terms of "Acts," and so will we. The three Acts of your novel coincide with the Beginning, Middle and End of your story. The Middle section will be twice as long as the Beginning and End, roughly half the length of the book. This means Act I will consist of chapters 1-3, Act II will consist of chapters 4-9, and Act III will consist of chapters 10-12.

Your novel should be structured like this:



Each Act must have a trajectory of its own. An Act doesn't serve as a complete story, and cannot stand by itself, but it does have a beginning, middle and end. Chapter 1 is the beginning of Act I, chapter 2 is the middle, and chapter 3 is the end of the first Act.

This may seem incredibly obvious and simple. But it is easy to overlook the obvious and simple when creating a story. You have a lot of things to think about. That's why we're taking time to create a workable structure now, so when it comes time to do the writing of your first draft, you don't have to worry about the structure part. You can spend your brain cells on the feverish act of imagining what happens next.

Because this is an adventure novel and not a play, we can be fairly loose with the way we construct our three Acts. The most important thing will be for each Act to fulfill some aspect of the story goal as it pushes the Hero on or culminates in a completion of the story goal.

In the next lesson we'll look at how Acts are marked by major changes and **defining scenes**. But before we can do that, we need to examine what a scene is—and what it isn't.

### Scenes

A **scene** is the smallest section of a story in which something of value to the story changes. Think of values as either positive or negative. Any time an important value goes from positive to negative or from negative to positive, you have the basis for a scene. Here are a few examples:

<u>Married</u> to <u>single</u> .	<u>Free</u> to <u>imprisoned</u> .
<u>Wealthy</u> to <u>poor</u> .	<u>Hopeless</u> to <u>hopeful</u> .
<u>Healthy</u> to <u>sick</u> .	<u>Having</u> to <u>not having</u> .
<u>Leaving</u> to <u>staying</u> .	<u>Ignorant</u> to <u>informed</u> .

All these are changes in values. All might form the crucial change necessary for a scene to have meaning in a story.

Remember chapter six from *The Prisoner of Zenda*? The scene began with Rassendyl on his way to get the king out of hiding and restore him to the throne. It ends when Rassendyl discovers that the king has been kidnapped by Black Michael. The change of values is from freedom to imprisonment. If the chapter had ended with the king being found where they left him, it would not have been a scene at all. There would have been no change of values and no movement of the story. Such a chapter might as well have been left out. As it is, the chapter is necessary because it reveals a vital story change: the kidnapping of the king.

Or take chapter eighteen of *The Blood Ship*, which begins with Shreve undecided, and ends with his decision to "kill Captain Swope." The change in values in this chapter is from undecided to decided. Suppose Shreve made no decision in the chapter. What then? It would not be a



*“People do not  
deserve to have  
good writing, they  
are so pleased with  
bad.”*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

scene. We would know nothing more at the end than we did at the beginning. Such a chapter would be better left out.

The only thing that goes into your story is the story. If a chapter or scene does not advance the story, cut it out. If it does not show a change of values important to the story, either change it or delete it. A scene isn't a scene without concrete change.

A scene is not just whatever happens at a certain place. A scene is not scenery.

Many beginning writers generate pages and pages of narrative prose in which nothing changes at all except a character's surroundings. Just because the hero moved from the castle wall to the dungeon doesn't mean we're in a different scene. It is only a meaningful change if it impacts the story. If the hero moves from the castle wall to the dungeon because he has been captured, then you probably have a scene. If he moves from the castle wall to the dungeon, and then the Great Hall, and then the smithy, and never finds what he's looking for, you probably have a lot of unnecessary moving around. Such a scene could be reduced to a single sentence, or even eliminated altogether.

Most scenes are limited to a single time and place, but not all. It can be confusing for a reader to follow a change in surroundings when nothing else changes. But some scenes might require a change of surroundings in order for the change in values to occur.

In *The Prisoner of Zenda*, for example, they only learn about the King's kidnapping because they go to the cottage where they left him. They change their surroundings. But that scene itself isn't about where they are, and it isn't two scenes. It's one scene about the King being taken by the villain. The two locales are necessary in showing us the meaningful change of values from free to imprisoned.

It is possible, even common, to have more than one scene in a chapter. However, I strongly recommend keeping your chapters to one scene; one change of values, one dramatic turning point.

### **Turning a Scene**

Dramatists sometimes talk about "turning a scene." What they mean is that every scene has a climactic moment that shows the change of values we've been discussing. That moment almost always comes at the end of the scene, or very near it. The point at which an important value changes is the point at which the scene "turns."

Chapter six of *The Prisoner of Zenda* turns on its last sentence: "The king is not here." Likewise, chapter eighteen of *The Blood Ship* turns on: "I'll

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kill Captain Swope.” In both cases the change in values (free to imprisoned and undecided to decided) results from the action of the entire scene. What happens when they find out the king is missing depends on what happens before. The decision to risk everything and kill Captain Swope is necessitated because of what happens earlier in the chapter between Shreve and the two gun-toting sailors, Boston and Blackie.

Scenes always turn either on a **revelation** or an **action**. Either a character learns something or does something. As you begin to outline the twelve chapters of your novel, ask yourself:

1. What’s going to change in this chapter (or scene)?
2. Will it change because of revelation or action? Will the character learn something or do something?

**Reading: *The Prisoner of Zenda*, chapter 13.**