

HOW TO WRITE A SCENE

Part 1: How to Write a Scene

What is a scene? A scene is a unit of a story that is larger than a beat, but smaller than a chapter. A scene depicts an active moment of a story and is typically contained to one place and time. Within a scene there is potential for change, and often, some kind of change is realized. Scenes can be separated by scene breaks, bridged by narrative summary, or set back-to-back.

What is a beat? A beat is a single step forward within a scene. A beat is a brief, singular motion. Each beat progresses the scene further towards its purpose. To identify a beat, look for the point where the type of narrative changes. For example, where description changes to dialogue. However, some beats are made up of multiple narrative components (for example, a dialogue beat may also have action). Beats can be internal or external.

Types of narrative components:

Narrative Component	What it is:	Active or Expository
Dialogue	Characters speaking	Active
Action	Characters moving	Active
Description	Sensory value (what do things look, feel, taste, sound, smell, etc. like)	Active
Narrative	Emotion, thought, reflection	Expository
Exposition	Information or context	Expository
Backstory	What happened in the past	Expository

The landscape of a scene. A scene has both an internal and external landscape. As the external scene progresses, the character's inner world, thoughts, emotions, reflection, and reactions progress alongside it. Causality between internal and external can be seen in how an external beat prompts an emotional reaction, or how an emotional reaction then prompts the character to act.

Factors of drama:

These are forces that fuel, propel, and complicate the story.

Goals	What each character in the scene wants. Characters have external goals (something tangible they want) and internal desires (something emotional or internal they desire) that are often interlinked. They may be manifestations of each other, or in other cases, begin to contradict.
Conflict	Conflict occurs when there are forces preventing the characters from getting what they want. This clash may occur from two characters whose goals and desires conflict, the character's own conflicting desires, outside forces preventing the character from getting what they want, and the consequences or potential consequences that arise from the character's desires and actions.

Stakes	Stakes are the worst possible narrative outcome if the character does not achieve their goal. This is the emotional hurt or external consequence that the character is bargaining with as they pursue their goals and desires.
Tension	Tension occurs when there are forces within the story driving the characters further from a point of resolution. Tension is created by the interplay of the protagonist's pursuit of their core desire and the potential or reality of the resulting consequences. When these forces of drama feel important, significant, or at risk, tension is created.

Example – from *White on White* by Aysegül Savas (full excerpt found [here](#))

Key: Dialogue / Action / Description / Narrative / Exposition / Backstory

Agnes, my landlady, was standing in front of the building, wrapped in a dark blue shawl that swallowed her thin shoulders, twisting and folding luxuriously around her torso.

It had been a long day at the archives: I'd gone through the illustrations of several books of hours from the northern region. The majority of historiated initials represented women in supplication. I had only gotten up from my table as the archives announced its closing.

Agnes appeared to be looking for something in her bag and I thought she must have lost her keys, but I noticed when I came closer that she was holding them in one hand.

"Back from the archives?" she asked. It was true that I didn't have much variation to my days but I was nevertheless taken aback. Had she been waiting for me at the door, guessing the hour of my return?

Beneath the blue shawl, she was wearing a wool purple coat. A red scarf was knotted at her neck. Even though the colors were striking, they were also unharmonious, as if she had chosen her outfit in the dark. In fact, her appearance suddenly struck me as disturbed.

She suggested going to the café next door. Hadn't she been on her way somewhere, I asked.

“Not really,” Agnes said. “I thought I’d just step out for a little and then I ran into you.”

Again, I wondered with some irritation whether she had been waiting for me to come back. Still, I had to maintain a good relationship. Agnes’s husband Pascal was an important scholar in my field—it was through the art history department that I’d found my lodging—and he would most likely be on my dissertation committee the following semester. I had never met Pascal in person; Agnes had come to the city alone, with the intention to paint in the studio above my flat.

“Just a quick coffee,” Agnes said. “But feel free to tell me if you’d rather not.”

Alright, I told her, adding that I’d need to get going soon.

Part 2: How to Write Narrative Summary

What is narrative summary? While scenes play out active moments rooted in specific moments of time, summary condenses longer periods of time and is rooted in the character’s internal world, rather than a specific moment on the timeline. Summary can be used to condense time, convey backstory or information, or dive into a character’s thoughts. While scene is rooted in an active moment, summary lifts above the story to give us more of a bird’s eye view.

When to use narrative summary: We want to use scene for moments in a story where the plot is progressing and the character is being active, but we can use narrative summary to condense periods of time where the character isn’t moving the plot forward. Narrative summary can be used to show routines or habits that happen over extended periods of time, skim over time quickly, zoom deeper into a moment, or to supplement the story with exposition, backstory, internal monologue, or emotional or psychological reaction. Sometimes scene and summary will blend and blur together. A long passage of summary might slowly build into scene, shifting into an active moment so seamlessly we don’t notice the transition. Or, summary may be embedded within or braided throughout a scene. Summary can lead us into and out of scenes, as a way of lifting above the story, or, a section summary can stand on its own, separated by scene breaks.

What is psychic distance? Psychic distance is how close the narrative is to the protagonist, and by extension how close the reader will feel to the story and character. Psychic distance can fluctuate across a piece, but ultimately, we want these fluctuations to be seamless and in line with the piece’s general limits.

Here's a paragraph where each sentence gets closer:

It is 2023 and a grocery store clerk is walking home from work. He stops to play with a stray dog. The dog jumps into his arms, and reminds him of his childhood dog, Rufus. The dog's nails scratch his leg and he ruffles its fluffy ears. What a cute little guy!

We begin with an objective fact, then move into the character's POV. We get an immediate detail, then a memory, followed by specific sensory detail. Finally, a thought.

What is free indirect narration? Free indirect narration is when the thoughts of the narrator and the protagonist blend seamlessly into one unified voice. There are no italics or filters offsetting the thoughts, rather, everything flows as one seamless voice. Typically, this is a style of close psychic distance, where a 3rd person narrator takes on the qualities of the protagonist.

The alternative would be direct (using quotes or italics) or indirect (using filters), both of which are shown in the following example:

I'm hungry, Penelope thought. *Maybe I'll order a pizza*. She went to dial, but couldn't find the phone number normally pinned to the fridge, and then realized, she couldn't find her phone, either. *Had someone broken in and stolen it?*

In free indirect narration, the example reads as follows:

Penelope was hungry. Maybe she'd order a pizza. She went to dial, but couldn't find the phone number normally pinned to the fridge. She couldn't find her phone, either. Had someone broken in and stolen it?