Write Cinematic Scenes

By Stephen V. Duncan

A film, by its very nature, is a visual art form. However, I've found that new screenwriters tend to forget that they've ever seen a film in their lives. Too often, inexperienced writers go right for wall-to-wall yakking when writing a scene or sequence for a movie. While verbal dialogue drives television scenes, you want to write dramatically effective cinematic scenes for a feature film.

An effective approach is to use *The Seven Elements of a Scene or Sequence.* Use them when you rough out scenes but especially during the rewriting process. I'm often surprised that some writers do not know the definition of a scene or a sequence. In screenwriting, this is important to know because, unlike novels or short stories, your scenes ultimately will appear on film, translated by a director and production crew. This process begins with the writer properly formatting the page with *scene headings* that describe whether it takes place interior or exterior, the specific location and the time of day. A scene takes place in a single location. A sequence is a *series of scenes* that tell a short story within the context of the larger story. Here are the seven elements and the questions you should ask and answer for yourself:

A protagonist. Who has the "most dramatic need" in the scene? In other words, what does this character want in the scene.

An antagonist. Who opposes the dramatic need in the scene? Ironically, this has the same meaning as the protagonist's—what does this character want in the scene? They should

oppose in order to create conflict. If each wants the same thing, then they must disagree on how to get it. Otherwise, your scene will bore the reader (an ultimately, the viewer).

Pivotal character(s). Who is for or against the protagonist and/or the antagonist in a scene? These characters have two purposes in a scene: keep the protagonist and antagonist engaged in conflict and/or provide a different point of view about the problem in the scene.

Dialogue. How do the characters communicate with each other: through the spoken word, non-verbally (through actions, reactions or pure silence) or both? For example, a character can say "I love you," then turn her back and, by her expression, reveal to the audience that she's lying.

Intentions. Why is each character in the scene? Actors call it "motivation." This is the driving force behind creating conflict in a scene.

Subtext. What emotions bubble underneath the scene? What is the scene really about? This element gets its cue from the theme of the screenstory.

Context. How does the scene relate to what came before it and what comes after it? This element gives the writer the ability to give the same scene intense suspense or create comedic tone without even rewriting it.

While these seven elements may appear simplistic, the viability of a screenplay depends on writing entertaining scenes and this approach can be an effective method to practice and improve the style and content of your screenplay.

EXERCISE

Start with a single sentence idea. Here are some I've used to inspire scenes:

"A couple finds an old pair of wingtip shoes in an attic."

"A family pet gives his/her owner a piece of his/her mind."

"Infidelity in a marriage"

"Face to face with an alien being"

"A husband of 20 years is a serial killer"

"Love at first sight"

The goal is improve your ability to write cinematic scenes and sequences. Pick one idea (or make up your own) and write it in three different ways:

1. The first approach is using only spoken dialogue. Keep it short, around two to three pages.

2. Next, write the same scene using only actions and non-verbal dialogue. You need to translate the spoken words to recognizable visual actions and reactions.

3. Finally, rewrite the same scene focusing on improving the visuals, but this time *write a single line of dialogue* to capture the subtext (theme) of the scene.

You can take this exercise to an advanced level by writing a six to eight page sequence based on the same idea. Each scene should use the seven elements and the overall sequence should use the seven elements. First, try it using only the spoken dialogue, then using a single theme-defining line of dialogue, and finally write a sequence combining spoken and non-spoken dialogue with visual action.

At the end of this process, your ability to combine both visual and auditory elements to create dramatically effective scenes should improve significantly.

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