

## Revision Cheat Sheet #2: Scenes

*This is the second cheat sheet in a three-part series on the basics of revising your own novel. It's best to revise your manuscript for structural elements like characterization, conflict, and plot before moving on to scene revisions, so I'm assuming in this post that you've already done some developmental work on your novel and are ready for a second round of revisions. This cheat sheet deals with the content, descriptions, and dialogue of your novel's scenes.*

### **Scenes are where the reader connects with your story.**

You might have planned extremely convincing characters with equally convincing conflicts for your novel, but unless you can let the reader into the story, they won't be able to connect with it. Your whole story should not be made up out of summaries, but neither should you write your entire book in meticulously-described scenes with no summary or reflection.



Scenes are like little snapshots into your characters' experiences, and it's your job as a writer to make sure you use this tool effectively. During your second round of revisions, it's time to take a closer look at your scenes to make sure you're including the right content, giving relevant descriptions, and using dialogue well.

### **Check #1: Content**

By now, you've begun to fine-tune the plot of your story. You know what your characters do and why they do it, so you can describe what happens when you put them into any given situation.

### **Which situations should your readers see them in, and which ones should you explain via summary?**

As a reminder, a scene is a portion of your book that shows exactly what characters are doing and saying at a certain time, while a summary gives the reader a shortened version of what happened during a longer period of time. Both are vital parts of your story.

- Watch out for action that doesn't belong. If your main character doesn't have anything important happen to her before she leaves home for the day, don't spend a scene showing her getting dressed. Tell the reader that she gets dressed and leaves for wherever it is that she's going. Then move on with a scene that matters.
- Watch out for summaries that should be scenes. In the first draft, it's common to skim over events that are hard to get right. However, the harder a scene is to express, the

bigger the likelihood is that it's an important one to include. Whenever your protagonist has an opportunity to learn, change, or grow, don't cheat your reader of the details. Take the time to write a scene in which that process plays out believably. Your reader will connect better when they get to experience those moments, too.

- Watch out for places where the scene-summary balance doesn't flow well. Every book is different, so you don't necessarily need to follow any magic numbers for the "perfect" combination. Instead, mark and fix any places where you have summarized more content than feels natural or have extended a scene beyond the relevant plot point. Both scene and summary can begin to drag on and lose the reader if used improperly or carried out too long.

When you begin to cut unnecessary scenes from your manuscript, it can feel like you're cutting out half of your book. Don't worry—for every irrelevant or overly-lengthy scene you cut, there is another relevant one you can add elsewhere. It's good to let the reader experience what the character is doing, seeing, and saying. Just make sure that the scenes you draw them into are the scenes that further your plot and character development.

## **Check #2: Description**

**Both the scenes and the summaries in your novel will include some description.**

Whether it's an expository passage that gives the setting or a little comment that shows what your main character is sensing, descriptions are crucial to helping your reader visualize the story. As you revise, make sure that you describe enough to orient the reader without boring them with too many irrelevant details.

- Cut out all of the descriptions that your main character wouldn't actually pay attention to. Would your character really be noticing to the color of his carpet as he got out of bed? If not, your reader doesn't need to know, either. Loading your action sentences with overly-specific nouns and strings of adjectives isn't actually adding to the reader's experience—if anything, it actually slows the story down. It's fine to alternate between action and description in your scenes; just be sure to mercilessly cut the details that don't matter.
- Engage multiple senses, not just sight, to allow the reader to experience each scene along with your character. Check to see if you've brought the scents, sounds, sensations, and even tastes of your story to life. This should not look like telling the reader directly that one character heard a plane or that another thought she could smell something. Instead, each significant sense should be incorporated as naturally as your character notices them. If he hears birds or horses' hooves, mention that those elements are present. If another main character feels that the air is humid or warm, describe them in the way she notices them—cut the qualifiers of "he heard" or "she feels."
- Make sure descriptions of setting follow a logical pattern. If you're describing a city neighborhood or a picturesque countryside, check that you have painted the word

picture in a specific order. Do your descriptions jump all over the place? Help the reader track the scene by describing the setting from left to right, top to bottom, nearest to farthest away, etc. They don't yet have the same picture in their mind that you do, so make it as easy as possible for them to get there.

Every book deals with descriptions in a different way, so don't necessarily rely on other people's work to determine whether or not your description level is right. If your descriptions progress logically, stay relevant, and show the details that your character is noticing, you're on the right track.

**Remember, the job of your descriptions isn't to match someone else's book—it's to help your reader experience your story.**

### Check #3: Dialogue

Dialogue can be one of the trickiest parts of your writing to get right, especially on the first draft. However, it's worth the effort of revision: through conversation, you can get inside the heads of your characters and reveal their personalities and motives in a unique and intimate way. As you revise your scenes, take a look at the way you use dialogue—you won't want to let this opportunity for character development go unused.

- Is all of your dialogue in character? The first time you write a scene, it's easy to write the conversation that you *want* to happen to move the scene from point A to point B. As you revise, make sure that you portray the conversation that would *actually* happen between those characters in that situation. Don't use their words to simply dump information; let them converse as real people, using their own speech patterns and thought processes to interact.
- Does your dialogue help move the scene forward in a meaningful way? It's true that dialogue needs to do more than advance the plot, but it's important when revising to cut out dialogue that has nothing to do with what's going on. As tempting as it is to let your characters have a heart-to-heart talk so your reader knows how they're really feeling, don't include it unless it fits in with what's going on in the story. People don't just start up deep conversations out of the blue, so neither should your characters.
- Are you using too much direct dialogue? Sometimes, a summary is more appropriate. If you can close a scene by telling the reader that the characters wrapped up their conversation and agreed to meet in a week, say exactly that—don't include the details of what they said as they made that agreement. Too much directly-quoted dialogue will slow down the pacing of the scene.

If you're not sure if your dialogue is believable, take some time to listen to the way people around you talk. Why do they start conversations? What is actually said, and what goes unsaid? The closer to reality your characters' conversations are, the more your reader will want to listen in.

One of the best books I've seen that helps writers with this stage of revising is *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* by Renni Browne and Dave King. It addresses description, dialogue, and several other specifics. My favorite part of the book is how the authors give specific examples from famous published novels to help illustrate each point. It may be a useful resource for you, too, so it's worth a peek!

Revising your scenes and summaries is a lot of work, but it's worth the effort. When your reader can immerse themselves in the story without having the descriptions or dialogue call too much attention to themselves, you'll know your writing has done its job.