

Interrogating Your Scenes: A Revision Exercise

By Kathy Fish



According to Jordan Rosenfeld, author of the wonderful [Make a Scene: Crafting a Powerful Story One Scene at a Time](#) :

“Scenes are capsules in which compelling characters undertake significant actions in a vivid and memorable way that allows the events to feel as though they are happening in real time.”

As a storytelling unit, your scenes *must* work. The following is a revision exercise aimed at honing your scenes and “keeping them honest.”

Go back and read a story or flash that is still in early draft phase. Locate ONE scene that you'd like to make more powerful or effective. In flash fiction that one scene may actually be your entire story (and note that a single scene does NOT a flash make unless it has some larger significance or resonance beyond the confines of that scene).

It's often extremely useful to read a scene aloud so that you can "hear" where it falters.

Now ask the following questions of your scene:

Does the scene capture your reader's attention?

Is the scene played out dramatically, i.e. with action and dialogue, perhaps in a new setting? You need to provide your reader with an experience, not a lecture.

Could more sensory detail be included to bring the reader into the scene? Do we have a sense of the characters inhabiting a specific space? (avoid "talking heads" syndrome)

What is the most important piece of information that needs to be revealed in this scene? How is the story moved along? (i.e., does the scene create movement in the story, however subtle?)

What does your character want at the beginning of this scene? Think of this as the scene's "engine."

Is there any complication or trouble in this scene? If not, add some!

And how does your character respond to this complication or trouble? This is a great way to show us who she is.

Look at the end of the scene. Does your reader now know more about the characters? Is she compelled to keep reading?

Could the dialogue be made sharper? Try cutting way back and see what it does for your scene. Avoid "ping pong" dialogue where every question is answered and it feels more like an interview than a conversation. Ruthlessly cut any "chatty" dialogue that doesn't move the scene.

Are you making use of subtext? Using body language? Is there anything interestingly strange or out of place here? Sometimes adding an unexpected detail enlivens a scene and primes your brain to think outside the box.

Finally, see what happens to the overall story if you cut the scene entirely. Remember flash fiction writers: *Interesting things can happen in the white space!*

~Kathy