

Writers Aloud

Episode 461

HELLO, AND WELCOME to *Writers Aloud*, the podcast about writing from the Royal Literary Fund.

In this episode, three writers reflect on the nuts and bolts of their writing craft.

First off, thriller writer William Ryan describes how he goes about making things happen on the page, touching on everything from tension and pacing to characterisation and dialogue.

William Ryan: Stories are made up of a series of scenes arranged in a way that explains the story to the reader, hopefully in an entertaining and engaging way. Scenes are not the same as chapters, although sometimes a scene can be a chapter, and vice versa, just to be confusing.

A chapter is whatever passage of writing an author (or editor) says it is — and can vary considerably. I've recently read a novel with 97 chapters, and another with four, although both are probably the same length overall.

A *scene* is an episode in a novel where something takes place, generally in a particular place, often defined by a continuous time period and usually with the same characters involved. It ends when there is a shift in time, or a shift in location, or a shift in the characters that are the focus of the scene. That's probably a more complicated explanation than it needs to be and, in some cases, it's completely wrong. Fortunately, you're an intelligent reader, so probably have a good idea of what is and isn't a scene already.

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This talk will hopefully offer a menu of suggestions and thoughts which might prove helpful when writing a scene. Obviously, every piece of writing is different, as is every writer's approach. This menu is based on working with many different students, often writing very different novels, each of which has required me to think about what makes an individual scene work, what makes it not work and what might improve it.

Let's get down to business.

Purpose

The starting point when writing a scene is to know its purpose within the overall story. Often a scene does one of three things — it reveals information that moves the story forward, it presents a challenge or danger to an important character that needs to be overcome, or it tells the reader something about a character or a character's motivation that changes the reader's perception of their role in the story, even if only slightly. Sometimes, it does all three and sometimes it does something else entirely.

Probably the best way to identify the purpose of a scene is to work out why your story needs *this* particular episode in order to be told properly. If you know why a scene is important to the story, then you probably know what you need to achieve in the scene. If a scene doesn't have a purpose in your story, you probably need to give it one — or remove it.

The good news is that if each of your scenes has a clear purpose, they give your story forward momentum and encourage your reader to read on.

Where Should I Start?

This is a tricky one but, in general, the sooner you get to the purpose

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of a scene the better, particularly with scenes that are largely made up of dialogue. If, for example, you are writing a conversation in which information will be revealed, it's tempting to start almost at the point of the revelation. Obviously there has to be some lead in, but try to ensure this is done as efficiently as possible.

An accelerated beginning doesn't work for every scene, however. If a scene is early in the novel and shows the atmosphere or the setting, that may be something you want to take more time with. Likewise, where the reader is aware that a scene involves danger, or is about to involve danger, taking your time getting to the danger will create anticipation and tension. To an extent the approach you take with regard to a scene is determined by its purpose and what you are trying to do dramatically.

That having been said, you need to know why you are not getting to the purpose of the scene quickly and if you don't have a good reason — think about accelerating the start of the scene.

Who Is Telling the Scene?

Many stories are told from a single point of view or by an all-seeing narrator and if that applies to you, you can skip this bit. However, if your story is told by multiple narrators, it's worth exploring the decision as to which of their perspectives you might want to use for a particular scene.

Generally speaking, if your central character is present in the scene you should probably use their point of view because the story is, after all, their story. However, the character 'telling' the scene can generally only record for the reader what their senses show them and what their thoughts are. In other words, they don't know for certain what the other characters are thinking and nor can they see themselves, unless in a mirror. If your character needs to be visible to the reader, then you may want to use a different character's point of view. Likewise, if you want to be inside

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another character's head, for example to reveal their thoughts and motivation, then you might want to use *that* character to 'tell' the scene. Another reason to shift to an alternate storytelling perspective is where you want to give information to the reader that your central character doesn't yet have. This can be useful to create tension. If, for example, your central character is unaware that another character is in love with them, but you tell the reader, then you've hopefully created an ongoing tension both in the scene and in the story going forward. This technique, of putting the reader ahead of the central character, can also be used to foreshadow danger, crucial revelations and so on. In each case, the reader engages with the novel by wondering what will happen when the central character uncovers the reality of their situation.

One last point on who is telling a scene. If a dramatic or exciting event occurs at which your central character isn't present, or can't be present, it's seldom a good idea to tell the central character (and therefore the reader) about it through dialogue. Rewrite the scene, if you're able to, from the perspective of someone who *is* present at the event, who can then tell your character about it afterwards in abbreviated form. Novels often have lots of dialogue, by their nature — so if you can show rather than tell something dramatic, it probably makes sense.

How Should You Start?

It's always a good idea to begin a scene by telling the reader which character's point of view you're using, where it's taking place, which other characters are present or which other characters will soon be present. This can often be done in one or two sentences and then it's dealt with and you can move on to the purpose of the scene. You might want to give information that the reader would expect to be told early on (for example, if a character is pointing a gun at the central character) as well as remind them of previously revealed information that is going to be relevant to the scene.

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Are there exceptions? There are always exceptions. Sometimes withholding or obscuring information is essential to building tension or creating questions in the reader's mind. For example, if you are writing a scene in a crime novel from a murderer's perspective, you probably want to obscure quite a lot of information about them — but, at the same time, give the reader some clues to get them thinking.

If the reader is trying to work things out, they're engaging with the story and that is very much a good thing.

Conflict, Risk, Obstacles and Subtext

There's a lot of overlap between these elements of a scene but if your scene is flagging, a bit flat, you might want to consider adding some extra ingredients.

Conflict is ingredient number one. Nearly all novels need conflict between the characters in order to work dramatically. Conflict, in terms of your story, means that your characters have different motivations, different ways of doing things and different concerns — which will involve some element of discussion and resolution. Without conflict, a story would be probably not be very interesting. In a mystery novel, for example, no one would have a motive to kill the victim so there would be no murder, murderer or possible suspects and if there were, all the characters would be doing their best to help the investigator solve the crime which would mean honesty, cooperation, support and a murderer who would reveal themselves early on, overcome by guilt. So not ideal in terms of the mystery element of the story. Conflict doesn't mean your characters need to be shouting at each other on every page, but you do need them to make the central character's journey slightly awkward — forcing them into finding ways to overcome the challenges they create.

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If, for example, you have a scene in which your central character needs to ask another character for information, you may want to consider why the character might not want to give that information or, if they do, how they might want to present it to protect themselves or show someone else in a bad light. Think also about how the central character will deal with this challenge.

Risk, or danger, is also a nice thing to have in a scene, particularly in the second half of the book where you are generally looking to escalate drama and tension. The risk doesn't necessarily need to be physical, it can be emotional, as in something that will cause the central character mental concern or stress, it can be status-related, where the risk is to the central character's economic or social wellbeing. The risk can also be to someone your central character cares about — a lover or a child, for example. It doesn't necessarily need to be significant. It can be just a fear of embarrassment, making a mistake or risking rejection from a member of the opposite sex — although more serious concerns can definitely give your story momentum and physical danger is always something that helps engage your reader. Risk is not something you want to introduce in every scene, but it can certainly add a little flavour if you do.

Obstacles are another element that might be worth including. The more challenging you can make the central character's progress towards their final objective in the story, and their objective in the scene, the better. Obstacles can be minor, a phone that doesn't work or unforeseen delays on the way to an appointment; or more substantial, a serious injury or another character determined to prevent the central character achieving whatever it is they need to achieve in the scene. While more substantial obstacles can have significance for the entire novel, sometimes they can work just for one scene.

Finally, it's also worth thinking about what might be going on underneath the surface of a scene. In the bigger story, secret motivations and agendas can lead to twists or revelations which undermine or contradict everything

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the reader has understood up to that point, often to good dramatic effect. In scene terms, introducing a hidden element may just make the scene more interesting to write and to read. If you have a scene where your central character is meeting another character for the first time, introducing a strong, but hidden, attraction or antipathy will alter how the scene develops. If one of the characters is unaware of the emotion on the other side, it's going to change the shape of the scene still further and introduce an element of depth to the scene, which will be visible to the reader if not to the characters.

When to End a Scene

As mentioned before, each scene in your novel is going to have at least one narrative purpose. The good news is that if you have worked out what the narrative purpose of your scene is, you know that the scene can end once you have dealt with it. If you do continue past an obvious connection with the purpose, make certain that you have a good reason to do so and that you aren't just writing to no effect.

How to End a Scene

When you're ending a scene, it's always a good idea to think about where your story is going next. Momentum in a novel comes, at least partially, from regularly engaging the reader's interest, often by posing a question that they can only have answered by reading on. If a scene has delivered an interesting revelation, it is often worth summarising it and musing on its implications. 'What does this development mean for the story?', 'What is going to happen next?' or 'How will the central character get out of this very difficult situation?' might each be questions that you want the reader to consider. Implicit in each such question is the promise that it will be answered by reading on.

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Even when you don't necessarily have a hook-like question that you prompt the reader to consider, you still may want to encourage the reader to look forward to the next scene; and even something as simple as telling the reader where the next scene will take place can create anticipation, if the reader has information about that location which will suggest to them that interesting things will happen there.

You can also give or withhold information that is relevant to the next scene. For example, once a scene's purpose has been achieved you may add something on — perhaps the presence of a mysterious man watching the central character. If you are using the central character's point of view to tell the scene, you might want to indicate that the mystery man is known to the central character but not tell the reader why, thereby encouraging them to read on to find out who they are and how they are known to the central character. If, however, the same scene is told from another character's point of view then it might be interesting for them to give the mysterious man's identity to the reader, who will perhaps know that their identity is significant and will present a danger or opportunity to the central character once they discover their presence.

Enjoy Yourself

This is perhaps the most important point. Writing should be imaginative, tricky, witty, moving, frightening and a host of other good things. Be adventurous and explore the unlikely, the unusual and even the impossible if you think that it will make your story more enjoyable to read.

If you're relishing the writing of a scene, then the likelihood is that the reader will relish reading it as well.

RLF: That was William Ryan. Next, Lauren James – twice Carnegie-nominated British author of many young adult novels, including *Green*

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Rising, The Reckless Afterlife of Harriet Stoker and *The Loneliest Girl in the Universe* – gives us a sneak peek into her creative process.

Lauren James: Whenever I'm asked how I write, my immediate response is always: using outlines! I can't write a single word without a detailed plan — sometimes reaching lengths of ten or more pages. When I'm not trying to keep control of the entire plot in place in my head, it frees up mental space to think about what comes next, to consider what I can lose and what's missing.

I pour every single thing I know about my story onto the page, explaining explicitly what I want the underlying message to be; how the characters will interact and how that changes over the course of the book; how and when I will foreshadow plot points; the reasons for my worldbuilding choices, as well as how they will influence the plot. If specific scenes or conversations jump out to me as being particularly important, I recount these too. This is not the place to draw out tension and intrigue — this is the place for clear, simple explanations that cover the depth of the story in full.

An outline is absolutely vital for distilling what I want to do with a story down to its core essence. I can't write a book if I don't understand what I'm trying to *do* with it — where is the tension leading? What will give this an ultimatum, an emotional pay-off? What is the tone of the writing? What are the weak points of the characters' relationship dynamics?

This is my starting point — from here, I can look at it as a whole narrative, and analyse plotlines and character development. I beta-test bold plot ideas by making changes to my outline and following the implications and adjustments to be made through the whole novel. It becomes a simple matter of changing a sentence or two in the outline to see if a plot change might work, rather than revising a bulky novel many times over.

Using my outline as a blueprint and a map, I can see what I need to keep —

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but also what is missing. What kinds of conversations could help convey information about backstory or worldbuilding to the reader? What is really important for them to understand, and what can I withhold and leave to their imagination?

Then, I begin to write. As I approach each scene, I already know why it's important to the plot. With all the difficult questions answered, it is frequently a joyful and natural process to sit down to write each day. It leads to constant surprises, as the writing process enriches and develops what was planned. I go down roads I'd never even noticed on my map. And, most importantly, I know what danger zones to avoid along my journey.

RLF: That was Lauren James. Mysterious as the creative process may be, it has, at some point, to bow to deadlines. Menna van Praag, a bestselling author whose work reflects her fascination with finding the magical in the mundane, knows this only too well. In the final talk in this episode, she shares her approach to deadlines.

Menna van Praag: This topic brings to mind the infamous quote by the great Douglas Adams: 'I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they go by'. Adams notoriously caused chaos among those around him – editors, publishers, producers – by his sheer inability to meet a deadline. I am not the same.

Perhaps, if I was a writer of Adams' stature, I might be a little more cavalier towards them but, as a jobbing writer, I can't really afford to alienate those who keep me in gainful employ. Yet, even then, if I *could* flout deadlines, I doubt I would. Because I *love* deadlines. I love them so much that I create artificial deadlines for myself so that I can be ready before the actual deadline.

I'm not sure where my love of deadlines came from, but I've always been like this — a swotty student from the first. Perhaps it comes from my intrinsically competitive nature; not in a sportive sense or really against

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other people, but with myself. So, when my editor gives me a deadline, I give myself an earlier deadline and pretend it's the original one. And, given my appalling memory, that trick usually works. Then, invariably, I try to better my own deadline and get the work finished a few weeks ahead of time. Achieving this gives me a ridiculous and utterly pointless thrill of accomplishment.

I do the same with word counts. I *love* word counts. I love setting them at a target that feels fairly reasonable – say, a thousand words a day – and then doing my absolute damndest to beat them. If I manage an extra few hundred words, I'm happy. Anything above 1,500 and I'm over the moon. It's a silly game to play, but it's my kind of fun.

Having said all that, since having children my attitude and slavish adherence to deadlines and word counts has become a little more...lax. Such are the multitudinous needs of children – all of which seem to come attached with a ticking clock of immediacy – that it's virtually impossible to keep meeting deadlines early. Now, as a freelancer, I work mainly when the kids are in school and any extra working hours must be snatched in secret or come at the cost of insistent and incessant moaning: 'Why are you *always* working?!' This being the inevitable response if I dare to check my emails at any point during the bedtime routine. And, frankly, I'm nowadays too exhausted to be motivated enough to write after ten o'clock, let alone put in the post-midnight hours that'd be necessary in order to meet artificially early deadlines.

Sadly though, exhaustion hasn't dampened my competitive spirit, so lately my inner swot is invariably disappointed by my failure to submit anything even a day in advance of the real deadline. Perhaps, after the kids leave home, I'll be able to resume playing my deadline-beating game. I fear, however, given the general sense of lethargy that seems to increase with every passing year as I head inexorably towards old age, it is unlikely.

RLF outro: That was Menna van Praag bringing to a close this episode,

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which was produced by Ann Morgan. There's more information about the writers we heard from today on the Royal Literary Fund website.

Next time, in the first installment of our 'My True Genre' series, Royal Literary Fund associates discuss how writers discover which form of writing suits them best, including considerations such as financial reward, social pressure, personal inclination and happy accidents.

We hope you'll join us.