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**Scene Stealers: A Practical Guide to Crafting Powerful
Fiction Moments**

Resource Guide:

Build-a-Scene Template

Use this guide when drafting or revising to make sure your scene is doing its job:

- Who is in the scene? - Protagonist and antagonist (or source of tension), emotional state going in
- What is happening in this scene? - Literal action or dialogue
- What's happening under the external actions? - Wants, fears, emotional stakes
- What changes in this scene? - Internal or external shift by the end
- Where is this scene set? – Readers want to know where they are, the time, the continuity from other scenes.

Build a scene: Grabbing and grounding the reader

- Drop into movement or change. Open mid-action, mid-thought, or at the moment something shifts—no need to warm up.
- Anchor the characters in space, time, and POV. Orient the reader with sensory clues, setting, or emotional tone without info-dumping.
- Signal tension early. Even quiet scenes should raise a question, desire, or subtle discomfort. (Remember I shout this in every class. What does your character want? You should know this!)
- Lead with a strong voice. Let your POV character's tone, perspective, or worldview shape the first line.
- Hint at stakes or the emotional core. Give the reader a reason to care—what's at risk beneath the surface?

Crafting Powerful Scenes Across Genres

Scene Strategy by Genre

Genre What to Emphasize in a Scene

Literary	Character Revelation & Subtext Text: “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman Scene: The narrator’s increasing obsession with the wallpaper pattern. Why it works: Subtle reveals of mental health, oppression, and agency through setting,
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	<p>internal monologue, and eerie description. Takeaway: Use objects or environment as metaphors for internal states.</p>
Speculative	<p>Worldbuilding in Action Text: “The Time Machine” by H.G. Wells Scene: The Time Traveller arrives in the far future. Why it works: Worldbuilding unfolds naturally through observation and interaction. Takeaway: Show the world through a character’s sensory experiences and responses.</p>
Romance	<p>Emotional Turning Point Text: “Pride and Prejudice” by Jane Austen Scene: Darcy’s first proposal to Elizabeth. Why it works: Combines external conflict with deep internal tension. Takeaway: Let the scene turn on misunderstanding or emotional disconnect.</p>
Mystery/Thriller	<p>Tension & Stakes Text: “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” by Arthur Conan Doyle Scene: Holmes and Watson wait in the darkened bedroom for the murderer. Why it works: Scene builds with creeping dread, sensory details, and ticking-clock pacing. Takeaway: Limit setting, amp sensory input, and add a time constraint for urgency.</p>
YA	<p>Voice & Internal Conflict Text: <i>The Outsiders</i> by S.E. Hinton Scene: Ponyboy and Johnny hide out in the church and reflect on the poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” Why it works: Uses distinct teen voice, layered with grief, identity, and shifting self-awareness. Takeaway: Let voice carry emotional resonance—teens process complex ideas through raw, immediate internal language.</p>
Memoir	<p>Moment of Realization</p>

	<p>Text: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou</p> <p>Scene: Young Maya chooses silence after trauma.</p> <p>Why it works: Powerful interiority and restraint. Deep emotion is conveyed through what's left unsaid.</p> <p>Takeaway: Let silence, absence, or withheld action convey emotional weight—memoir thrives in the tension between what happened and what couldn't be said.</p>
Flash Fiction	<p>Compression & Emotional Impact</p> <p>Text: Just a Touch (by Finnian Burnett) (Five Minute Lit)</p> <p>Scene: A queer narrator touches their best friend's beard and confronts layered desire and memory.</p> <p>Why it works: In less than 100 words, it captures vulnerability, queerness, aging, love, and tension between past and present—all anchored in one tactile moment.</p> <p>Takeaway: Flash fiction thrives on small moments that hint at bigger truths. Focus on one sensory detail or line of dialogue that cracks a character open.</p>

Genre examples

Literary	internal conflict, small sensory detail that hints at larger themes
Speculative	Worldbuilding through action, tension between tech/magic and human choices
Romance	Power dynamics, longing, moments of vulnerability or misunderstanding
Mystery/Thriller	Rising tension, red herrings, shift in who knows what
YA	immediacy, emotional stakes, push-pull of independence and connection
Memoir	Emotional truth, reflection layered into action or flashback

Flash Fiction	Compression of stakes, emotional clarity, one moment that changes everything
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What does a scene need to be a scene?

- **Conflict or Desire:** Even internal. Every scene contains something wanted, resisted, or risked.
- **A Clear Moment in Time**
Even in fragmented or non-linear narratives, scenes happen *somewhere*, *sometime*. A scene isn't an idea—it's an experience unfolding in real time.
- **A Character in Motion**
Motion can be physical, emotional, or psychological. Someone *wants* something, even if it's just to stay still or hide a feeling.
- **A Shift or Change**
Something is different by the end. The power dynamic, the mood, the knowledge, the relationship, the self-perception—something has shifted.
- **Sensory Anchoring**
Scenes live in bodies and spaces. A scent, a texture, a flicker of light—just one vivid sensory detail can ground the scene and make it real.
- **Emotional Resonance or Tension**
What's unsaid is often as powerful as what's said. A good scene hums with emotional undercurrent, even in silence.
- **Compression & Focus (especially in flash)**
It doesn't need exposition or explanation. A single moment can contain a universe if you aim for *emotional accuracy over explanation*.
- **Implied Stakes**
Even a quiet conversation can have sky-high stakes if it touches a nerve. Ask: *What does the character stand to lose (or gain) here?*

Scene Spark Prompts

- What does your character **need to say** but can't?
- Start a scene at the **exact moment** something goes wrong.
- Give your character the thing they thought they wanted—then show them breaking.
- Let the setting work against the character.

Scene Surgery: How to Revise with Precision

Use these questions to revise effectively:

- If I cut this scene, would the story still make sense?
- Is the pacing right? (Too slow? Too fast?)
- What's the emotional *turning point* of this scene?
- Am I leaning too heavily on one element (dialogue, setting, etc.)?
- Is this scene earning its place in the story?

Takeaway:

A reader doesn't mind doing some of the work, but grounding them in a place and time, introducing them to the character(s), and clearly setting the tone allows them a way to imagine the scene, to bring themselves into the world of your story. Grounding the reader allows you to focus on the important part of a scene—what the main character wants and what they're doing to try to get it.

Thank you!

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