

Chapter One

What Is a Scene?

The basic premise of the Book Architecture Method is this: Your book has ninety-nine scenes. If you find your scenes and put them in the right order, you will be all set. I don't believe this is easier said than done—or harder said than done. It is what it is. There will be periods of questioning and there will be periods of joy; there will be divine inspiration searing across the page like a cosmic flame, and there will be fidgeting with things until they fit just right. All I can say is that it does happen. I have seen writers line up their ninety-nine scenes in the right order. When they do, the rest is just details.

When you start offering methods to people, their first question is, “Does it work?” As I mentioned in the introduction, this is a method, not a formula; as such, it needs to be applied. Does your book have exactly 99 scenes? I doubt it! Your book has 72 scenes, or 138 scenes, or another number that you won't know until you are done. I chose ninety-nine for the sake of discussion.

I chose it because it feels one shy of completion. You cannot achieve unity, the goal of any piece of writing,¹ by trying to be comprehensive. No matter how hard you try, you will never completely cover your topic—all you can do is be consistent and coherent. Perfectionism can appear in many guises, but it is always an impossible task that likes to present itself as something that isn't. We need to adjust our definition of perfection to mean “getting your ninety-nine scenes in the right order”—and let the hundredth come when it is good and ready.

What Is a Scene?

Since we are trying to get our ninety-nine scenes in the right order, we need to first ask, “What is a scene?” Everything needs to be presented in a scene. The most commonly heard expression in writing circles is probably “Show, don't tell,” which means you must put us in the scene. Don't tell us about it, don't tell us that it happened, don't tell us that your characters—or you as the narrator—had this set of feelings about it; make it happen for us as readers or viewers. The earliest reference to “Show, don't tell” is in Aristotle's *Poetics*:

While constructing plots and working them out complete with their linguistic expression, one should so far as possible

1. This is a large claim, but I am not the first to make it. “Unity is a fundamental—quite possibly the fundamental—esthetic criterion” (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*).

visualize what is happening. By envisaging things very vividly in this way, as if one were actually present at the events themselves, one can find out what is appropriate, and inconsistencies are least likely to be overlooked.

Scenes are how dramatic information is received. There are times to tell as well as show, of course, and I will return to this material in Chapter Ten. Even good telling, though, is embodied in a time and a place, with an emotion a reader and writer can share.

Two related definitions of scene have some currency these days. A scene is where something happens, and because something happens, something changes in a way that propels the narrative. In our work on series, we will examine how these changes can be charted and reconstructed in a rhythmic way that is capable of conveying meaning. For now, just remember:

A scene is where something happens. A scene is where something changes.

There will eventually be five related definitions of scene, but we're on a need-to-know basis here. So let me just add one more at present:

A scene is related to the central theme of the book.

Because your book can only be about one thing, each scene has to relate to that one thing—your theme—in some way. Of course, at this stage of your work, you may not know what your one thing

is—in fact, you probably don't, and that's okay. When I teach a class, for example, I have writers record what their theme is in week one; when they return to their original idea weeks later, they are always surprised and sometimes astounded by how their perception of their own work has changed by using this method. You can try this now: Write out a few sentences in answer to this question: "What is your book about?" This is not the same thing as "What happens in your book?" A lot happens in your book, I'm sure. But what is it about? This book is about a method for organization and revision. "The Ugly Duckling" is about a swan's egg that ends up in a duck nest. What is the one thing your book is about?

Scenes in "The Ugly Duckling"

Since we are all just starting up this mountain, I find it useful for us to have a narrative to study in common. Hence, "The Ugly Duckling." If you have not read "The Ugly Duckling" lately, please turn to the clean copy on page 000 and do so now. You will get so much more out of what follows.

Because developing an understanding of what a scene is will come in so handy when we examine our own manuscripts, the first exercise is to identify the number of scenes in "The Ugly Duckling." Flip to the clean copy in the "Tools" section, and by applying the first two definitions of scene (a scene is where something happens; a scene is where because something happens, something else changes), try to divide this story into its component scenes yourself.

There are a few tricks to use as you try to decide whether a certain set of passages belongs to the same scene, or if we are in an appreciably different part of the book.

Scenes often occur in a single time period.

Scenes often occur in the same place.

Scenes often have one central subject matter.

These diagnostics are based on Aristotle's three unities: a play should operate in a single place, it should depict a limited time period (either twenty-four or thirty-six hours), and all of the events presented should contribute to a single action (or, in our case, your book can only be about one thing). While the unities proved a little restrictive for an entire work of drama, I think they can be applied profitably to individual scenes. Keep these three ideas in mind when you look at the individual scenes in "The Ugly Duckling," and they will help you track where one scene ends and the next scene begins.

Are you ready with your number of scenes in "The Ugly Duckling"? Six is a number I feel I can defend. I have attended many lively conversations about why this short story could have thirty-two scenes or seventeen scenes, or perhaps more reasonably, nine scenes. The reason why well-intentioned writers have lobbied for nine scenes instead of six may be due to the fact that the links are so skillful. A link is a passage, from a single phrase to several pages in length, that moves the reader from one scene

to the next. (Links can be unobtrusive or they can be obvious; Chapter Ten will discuss varieties of links.)

Consider the following passage:

“Well, if we don’t understand you, who should? I suppose you don’t consider yourself cleverer than the cat or the old woman, not to mention me! Don’t make a fool of yourself, child, and thank your stars for all the good we have done you. Have you not lived in this warm room, and in such society that you might have learned something? But you are an idiot, and there is no pleasure in associating with you. You may believe me: I mean you well. I tell you home truths, and there is no surer way than that of knowing who are one’s friends. You just set about laying some eggs, or learn to purr, or to emit sparks.”

“I think I will go out into the wide world,” said the duckling.

“Oh, do so by all means,” said the hen.

(end scene four)

So away went the duckling. He floated on the water and ducked underneath it, but he was looked at askance and was slighted by every living creature for his ugliness. Now autumn came. The leaves in the woods turned yellow and brown. The wind took hold of them, and they danced about. The sky looked very cold and the clouds hung heavy with snow and hail. A raven stood on the fence and croaked

“Caw, caw!” from sheer cold. It made one shiver to think of it. The poor duckling certainly was in a bad case!

(begin scene five)

One evening, the sun was just setting in wintry splendor when a flock of beautiful large birds appeared out of the bushes. The duckling had never seen anything so beautiful. They were dazzlingly white with long waving necks. They were swans, and uttering a peculiar cry they spread out their magnificent broad wings and flew away from the cold regions to warmer lands and open seas . . .

The link, the middle paragraph presented here, binds scenes four and five together as if it were mortar between two bricks. I have drawn a bold line to separate the two scenes where I have because it has to go somewhere, but I could also have drawn it where the dashed line is. If you cannot tell which scene a link belongs to, that is the sign of a successful link. When it comes to dividing your own scenes, which you will do at the end of the next chapter, you can put the link with whichever passage makes marginally more sense.

Once we become aware of the potential challenges posed by some links, we can return to the three unities of scene (scenes occur in a single time period, in the same place, and have one subject) and find that dividing a narrative into its component parts is really not that difficult.

“Let me look at the egg which won’t crack,” said the old duck. “You may be sure that it is a turkey’s egg! I was cheated like that once and I had no end of trouble and worry with the creatures, for I may tell you that they are afraid of the water. I simply could not get them into it. I quacked and snapped at them, but it all did no good. Let me see the egg! Yes, it is a turkey’s egg. You just leave it alone, and teach the other children to swim.”

“I will sit on it a little longer. I have sat so long already that I may as well go on till the Midsummer Fair comes round.”

“Please yourself,” said the old duck, and away she went.

At last the big egg cracked. “Cheep, cheep!” said the young one and tumbled out. How big and ugly he was! The duck looked at him.

“That is a monstrous big duckling,” she said. “None of the others looked like that. Can he be a turkey chick? Well, we shall soon find that out. Into the water he shall go, if I have to kick him in myself.”

(end scene one)

Next day was gloriously fine, and the sun shone on all the great dock leaves. The mother duck with her whole family went down to the moat.

Splash! into the water she sprang. “Quack, quack,” she said, and one duckling plumped in after the other. The water

dashed over their heads, but they came up again and floated beautifully. Their legs went of themselves, and they were all there. Even the big ugly gray one swam about with them.

“No, that is no turkey,” she said. “See how beautifully he uses his legs and how erect he holds himself. He is my own chick, after all, and not bad looking when you come to look at him properly. Quack, quack! Now come with me and I will take you out into the world and introduce you to the duckyard. But keep close to me all the time so that no one will tread upon you. And beware of the cat!”

(begin scene two)

The separation between scene one and two above is relatively easy to detect, because of the time shift. Sometimes a link can be a paragraph or longer, as we saw here; sometimes it can be a simple phrase. “Next day was gloriously fine.” That’s it. The setting and characters remain the same, which allows the action to develop in a comprehensible way, because we are familiar with the surroundings. There is also a time shift that signals the transition from scene two to scene three provided by the simple link, “So the first day passed.”

“The other ducklings are very pretty,” said the old duck. “Now make yourselves quite at home, and if you find the head of an eel you may bring it to me.”

After that they felt quite at home. But the poor duckling who had been the last to come out of the shell, and who was

so ugly, was bitten, pushed about, and made fun of both by the ducks and the hens. “He is too big,” they all said. And the turkey cock, who was born with his spurs on and therefore thought himself quite an emperor, puffed himself up like a vessel in full sail, made for him, and gobbled and gobbled till he became quite red in the face. The poor duckling did not know which way to turn. He was in despair because he was so ugly and the butt of the whole duckyard.

(end scene two)

So the first day passed, and afterwards matters grew worse and worse. The poor duckling was chased and hustled by all of them. Even his brothers and sisters ill-used him. They were always saying, “If only the cat would get hold of you, you hideous object!” Even his mother said, “I wish to goodness you were miles away.” The ducks bit him, the hens pecked him, and the girl who fed them kicked him aside.

Then he ran off and flew right over the hedge, where the little birds flew up into the air in a fright.

“That is because I am so ugly,” thought the poor duckling, shutting his eyes, but he ran on all the same. Then he came to a great marsh where the wild ducks lived. He was so tired and miserable that he stayed there the whole night. In the morning the wild ducks flew up to inspect their new comrade.

(begin scene three)

So far, so good. But now, in addition to a time shift, there is a change in the quality of time. In scene three, time speeds up—instead of lasting a single day like scenes one and two, it lasts for an indeterminate period. Once the basic coordinates of your story have been established, you too can begin to play with the expansion or compression of time, a switch in scenic locations, or a shift in subject matter. A change in location can be a very useful tool for identifying where one scene shifts to another. Scene two, for example, takes place under the “great dock leaves” while scene three happens in a marsh.

A change in setting also marks the separation between scene three and scene four:

“Oh, thank Heaven!” sighed the duckling. “I am so ugly that even the dog won’t bite me!”

Then he lay quite still while the shots whistled among the bushes, and bang after bang rent the air. It only became quiet late in the day, but even then the poor duckling did not dare to get up. He waited several hours more before he looked about, and then he hurried away from the marsh as fast as he could. He ran across fields and meadows, and there was such a wind that he had hard work to make his way.

(end scene three)

Towards night he reached a poor little cottage. It was such a miserable hovel that it could not make up its mind which

way even to fall, and so it remained standing. The wind whistled so fiercely around the duckling that he had to sit on his tail to resist it, and it blew harder and ever harder. Then he saw that the door had fallen off one hinge and hung so crookedly that he could creep into the house through the crack, and so he made his way into the room.

An old woman lived here with her cat and her hen. The cat, whom she called “Sonnie,” would arch his back, purr, and give off electric sparks if you stroked his fur the wrong way. The hen had quite tiny short legs, and so she was called “Chickie low legs.” She laid good eggs, and the old woman was as fond of her as if she had been her own child.

In the morning the strange duckling was discovered immediately, and the cat began to purr and the hen to cluck.

(begin scene four)

The final scenic division of the story occurs between scene five and scene six. Between scenes five and six, the time changes, the place changes, and the central action changes. The whole vibe changes, and you have a scene that is not only formally different—it is essentially different from the scene that precedes it. This is possible because of a special kind of link (explored in Chapter Ten) called a “voice-over” link. Basically, the voice-over link is a move by the narrator to change a variety of the coordinates of the story simply by telling us that is what is going to happen. I have placed this link in bold in the following passage:

Early in the morning a peasant came along and saw him. He went out onto the ice and hammered a hole in it with his heavy wooden shoe, and carried the duckling home to his wife. There he soon revived. The children wanted to play with him, but the duckling thought they were going to ill-use him, and rushed in his fright into the milk pan, and the milk spurted out all over the room. The woman shrieked and threw up her hands. Then he flew into the butter cask, and down into the meal tub and out again. Just imagine what he looked like by this time! The woman screamed and tried to hit him with the tongs. The children tumbled over one another in trying to catch him, and they screamed with laughter. By good luck the door stood open, and the duckling flew out among the bushes and the newly fallen snow. And he lay there thoroughly exhausted.

But it would be too sad to mention all the privation and misery he had to go through during the hard winter. When the sun began to shine warmly again, the duckling was in the marsh, lying among the rushes. The larks were singing and the beautiful spring had come.

(end scene five)

Then all at once he raised his wings and they flapped with much greater strength than before and bore him off vigorously. Before he knew where he was, he found himself in a

large garden where the apple trees were in full blossom and the air was scented with lilacs, the long branches of which overhung the indented shores of the lake. Oh, the spring freshness was delicious!

Just in front of him he saw three beautiful white swans advancing towards him from a thicket. With rustling feathers they swam lightly over the water. The duckling recognized the majestic birds, and he was overcome by a strange melancholy.

(begin scene six)

Now that we have separated Andersen's individual scenes from each other, the next step is to give each a name. Naming your own scenes will prove especially useful during the editing process when you are moving scenes around and evaluating them each on its own terms. A good name reflects the definitions of a scene: what happens, what changes, and how it relates to the theme. A good name will instantly bring you back to what that scene is about.

In "The Ugly Duckling" I have assigned the following names to the six scenes:

1. The Shell Will Not Crack
2. Can't Make Him Over
3. What Sort of a Creature Are You?
4. Conversation in the Cottage
5. The Hard Winter
6. The Royal Birds

Before we leave our scenic analysis of “The Ugly Duckling,” I want to make one other observation about this story: the scenes are all almost exactly the same length. Scenes one through six are, respectively, 645 words, 742 words, 599 words, 693 words, 626 words, and 514 words. While this no doubt contributes to the rhythm of the story, such uniformity in scenic length is not necessary—or even very common. Sometimes a flashback scene can be done really well in a paragraph, and there are examples in literature where scenes are more than a hundred pages long.²

The important thing to understand is that a scene is not the same thing as a chapter. A chapter is a movement larger than a scene. There are also movements that are smaller than a scene; for example, a paragraph, a sentence, or a word. In fact, we will be taking all of our material out of chapters for now; in the Book Architecture Method, a scene is the basic measuring unit by which you will construct your manuscript. When these units are identified, they immediately become distinct. They are then mobile and flexible. They can be seen as weak or strong, as a hopeless aside, or as the climactic scene after all. They can be put in a different order getting a very different result. They are what unity is truly made of:

unit + unit + unit + unit = unity

Grasping the scene as a unit will orient you through your material in a way that nothing else can.

2. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette describes five scenes from Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* that combined total almost 450 pages.

Brainstorm Your Scenes

We are now ready for your first action step: making a list of all of your scenes . . . with a catch. You will keep this list throughout the process, so you may want to write it in a convenient place. In the future you will be highlighting scenes that need to be improved, adding the names of scenes you want to write, and saying good-bye to “bad” scenes once and for all. You will eventually use this list to reorder your scenes as you complete your organization and set yourself up for a successful revision.

For now, all you need to do is generate the list. When you list your scenes, include every scene you can think of, even the scenes that are not completely finished. Some may exist only in your mind. You may have a set of really good ideas that are still only sketched out in the briefest form, or you may have rewritten a scene several times. Through this process you will start to understand what a scene means to you and how it can best be detected in your writing.

The only rule is this: You cannot peek at the book itself. That’s the catch! Make your list over a few days from memory only. Some scenes may come back to you in different physical environments you travel through, and that’s great—keep the list with you as a reminder of your involvement with the narrative as a whole. You may feel that you will be able to remember every scene in your book. You won’t. When you finish your list, you will find that you have forgotten scenes that are repetitive, tangential, or lacking any real impact. That is why it is imperative

that the list be made from memory, because memory is the surest guide to the memorable—and the memorable is the surest guide to the meaningful.

Action Step #1: Brainstorm Your Scenes

Make a list of every scene in your book without looking at your manuscript. Give each scene a name that will bring you quickly back to what happens there.