



## Scene Work makes the Story Work

by Madi Goff

The newest season of your favorite TV show just dropped, and you're on the couch ready to binge. You hit the remote and the opening credits play, quickly followed by a montage. "They must be catching us up," you think. Then, the screen goes dark, voice over narration begins... and continues... and keeps going. Now, thoroughly bathed in exposition, you're thinking, "*Get to it!*"

Just when you thought it couldn't drag on any longer: Surprise! The TV show's writer pops on the screen in a Zoom from home set up and summarizes the rest of the episode for you. Then, to your great relief, the credits roll. You lean back thinking, "*WORST. SHOW. EVER.*"



Thank goodness that story will never be a reality. Why not? Because the writers of your favorite TV show understand that engaging stories require scenes, not just summary! And you'll want to follow the same rule if you want to write stories that ignite your reader's passion, align them with your cause, and spur them into action.

*(Please scroll down to read more.)*

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## Jargon is No Bargain

Earlier this month, McSweeney's published an article well worth reading, [\*We Dare You To Figure Out What Our Nonprofit Does\*](#), written by James Klein. This satirical dressing down might feel all too familiar. In just a 3-minute read, it reminds all of us about the importance of leaving jargon and abstractions behind when we communicate what we do.



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Sadly, Klein won't offer you any answers about how to do things differently, but, hey, that's why The Goodman Center is here.

## Scene Work makes the Story Work (cont.)

Storytellers use **summary** when they are giving **exposition** ("Naomi grew up in rural Washington among the trees and wildlife."), **contextual information** ("Naomi graduated and immediately moved back to her home in the forests of Washington."), **explanation** ("City life wasn't for Naomi."), and **collapsing time** ("Six weeks later, Naomi..."). Summary gives us what we need to know to get into the scene.

**Scenes**, like the scenes in television, film, and stage plays, unfold in real time and take place in a specific location. They have dialogue between characters, or if a character is alone, an internal monologue - the character's thoughts. Scenes contain sensory details and emotions that fire up our imaginations and allow the audience to experience the action right along with the characters.



When you're writing a scene, you bring your audience into the moment so that they are inside the story. The audience feels like they are sitting there next to the protagonist, as if this moment happened to them, too.



Here's an example of being *outside* the scene:

*Peter went to his first job interview. The restaurant manager, Mr. Henley, was impressed with his preparation and hired him on the spot.*

While we might be happy for Peter, his story isn't grabbing us. In the example below, we are now inside the scene, entering the restaurant with Peter:

*Peter enters the quiet restaurant for his first job interview. "Table for two?" the host in his crisp black shirt smiles and picks up two menus. Peter feels the nerves bouncing around inside him. "I'm here for an interview," he replies, shakily. The host smiles, "Right this way. Mr. Henley uses the back office for interviews".*

Notice the use of present tense and how we're tracking Peter moment to moment, describing the action as if it's happening in real time, right in front of us. This technique is more engaging and can more accurately honor Peter's emotional experience. Of course, if you're short on space or time, try starting the scene later. Maybe Peter is already in the back office talking to Mr. Henley.

Compelling scenes can arise anywhere in your story. Grab your audience's attention right away by opening your story with a scene. Emotional or vulnerable moments are important scenes to include. Decision points or "Ah-ha!" moments of realization are engaging scenes. The inciting incident of your story should always be in scene form. This is the moment your protagonist thinks "That's it! Things have to change!" Here, your protagonist makes a decision, their goal snaps into existence, and their journey to achieve that goal begins!

Once you know what scenes you want to write, here are some guidelines for writing them:

- **Use the present tense.** It can feel strange at first. But trust us, it helps both you (as the writer) and us (the audience) stay in the moment with your characters.
- **Activate the senses.** Using sensory details allows your audience to empathize with your characters and experience the story in real time in their imaginations. Describe sights, scents, sounds, touch, and taste. Which senses do you use when you write stories? Can you activate others?
- **Express emotion.** Give the audience an opportunity to feel your characters' emotions. Sensory details as well as thoughts and dialogue are two great tools for expressing emotion.

- **Interviewing skills are storytelling skills.** The interview is where you need to get all the details required for a compelling story. In the final class of our Storytelling workshop series, we discuss interviewing tips and techniques, and students crafting stories quickly realize the significance of developing this skill. An interviewer needs to be ethical, thoughtful, and painstakingly detailed. Getting good takes training and practice.



Next time you're writing for your organization, remember to write scenes. Keep your summary to a minimum. Effective, memorable, persuasive stories are full of compelling scenes. Stories are made up of scenes or scenes and summary, but never summary alone. TV writers know this, and they use it to make us hit play on that next episode. Because we can't wait to experience what happens next!

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## About Us

This edition of *free-range thinking* was written and edited by Kirsten Farrell and Madi Goff. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

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