

the entire film, but we allow the audience to discover the characters for themselves. To develop a character—whether a kid whose trip to the wrong place triggered social change or an important historical figure—we do two things: explore the subject's complexity, and present that complexity through a series of revelations.

Reconstructing Scenes

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

Authors have written plays in scenes for thousands of years, and short stories and novels in scenes for hundreds of years. Narrative journalists have to write that way, too, because life unfolds in scenes. We can render two types of scenes: those we observed, and those we must reconstruct from what others observed.

The advent of film has pushed literature toward greater reliance on scenes, has made it more cinematic. Great novels of the nineteenth century such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* include some wonderful scenes but also a lot of authorial exposition. Chapters often begin with a long disquisition on the novel's themes. Compare that structure with a twentieth-century, post-moving-picture novel like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a cinematic novel in which one scene moves swiftly to the next. Competing with television and film has probably been good for nonfiction writers. I fear those media might overtake us at some point, yet they force us to work harder to make the reader see the events in our narratives.

Strong scenes, whether observed or reconstructed by the author, must include several key elements.

1. **Accuracy.** All the details must be completely accurate. Either you saw the ghost come down the corridor, or you must have an eyewitness account of it, if not several.
2. **Atmosphere.** For your readers to experience the scene, you must do more than describe how things looked. Sounds, smells, temperature, and even the textures of objects are all important.
3. **Dialogue.** The people in your scenes must talk to one another and interact with one another, or the narrative will feel lifeless. Think about

telling a friend about something that happened. How many times do you say, "He said to me, and then I said to him . . ." We tell stories this way because life sometimes unfolds this way; we talk to people all day long. Dialogue is how we get to know people, fall in love, tell someone off—in short, do everything that matters in life. If you are reporting a story, you can hear what's said when the opera diva argues with her voice coach or the pharmaceutical lobbyist sidles up to the congressman. If you try to use accurate dialogue to show what was said when Washington crossed the Delaware, you may have a harder time. People's memoirs often include this information. Sometimes you can achieve the dramatic effect of dialogue by quoting people's letters. You can get a complete record of legislative sessions or trials—often sources of high drama—going back two hundred years.

4. **Emotion.** You must know what people were feeling about the events depicted in your scenes. If you were there, how did you feel about what you saw? When you interview participants about an event, you must ask them what happened and how they felt at the time.

I wrote a narrative nonfiction book, *Bury the Chains*, about England's antislavery movement in the late 1700s. In the space of about five years, a remarkable group of people turned public opinion strongly against slavery. One key moment in this monumental change occurred in May 1787. Twelve men assembled in a Quaker bookstore and printing shop located in what is now London's financial district and planned their strategy.

This dramatic moment was crucial to my book. The only surviving direct record of the meeting is a one-page handwritten summary. It simply noted the date, list of attendees, and resolutions they had unanimously adopted: that the slave trade was unjust and should be stopped, that they would open a bank account, and that a certain number of people would constitute a quorum for future meetings.

How could I bring this important moment alive? I used several different types of information: documents and newspapers, personal experience, memoirs, and biographies.

I found extensive biographical information about two of the men who attended the meeting. I can describe what another man looked like from a portrait. I learned that a fourth person in the group, the printer-bookseller, had stopped every morning on his way to work at a coffee shop just around the corner. These little details made a difference.

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For other aspects of this book I read lots of newspapers from that time. In one I noticed an advertisement for dancing and fencing lessons offered next door to the bookshop—an additional detail. When scouring background material, it is a good idea to have a well-developed wish list but also to be open to unexpected finds.

I visited the location of that Quaker bookstore: a courtyard off Lombard Street in London. The small building has been replaced by Barclays Bank's twenty-two-story headquarters. Just across the courtyard, though, a pub has survived that was there in 1787—a detail I could actually observe.

I found in my reading that a few years before that 1787 meeting, workers had discovered a huge trove of two-thousand-year-old pieces of pottery, Roman Empire coins, and so forth while excavating the street that runs near this courtyard. It is not conventional scene-building material, but that detail gave me a springboard to mention another great empire also based on slavery and to emphasize just how long slavery had been part of human experience, and how audacious it was to think of ending it.

The bookstore was just around the corner from the British Empire's central post office. I found a journalist's description of the scene as the afternoon mail was dispatched. Dozens of delivery coaches raced out of the post office courtyard, carrying the mail to all parts of the kingdom. The meeting minutes say that it began at five in the afternoon, so I know there must have been sounds of galloping horses and postmen blowing their horns.

What other details of sight, sound, and smell could I find? Though no description of that particular bookstore and printing shop survives, there are depictions of similar ones in London at that time. Bookselling, publishing, and printing usually took place under the same roof. The printer and his family lived upstairs, and their cows and pigs often lived out back. From this information I could set the scene: books displayed for sale in the front of the room, and the huge printing press in the middle.

I studied eighteenth-century printing presses to add to my description of the scene. Large sheets from the flatbed presses hung on wooden racks overhead, and buckets of human urine would have stood around the room. In these very unlikely surroundings, the British antislavery movement was born.

Not all of these details are in the excerpt of my book that appears here (see page 135). Still, I was able to make use of almost all of them somewhere in the narrative because—happily for storytelling

purposes—a huge amount of the story happened in a very small geographic area. The antislavery campaigners, some of the leading slave merchants, and various other players in this great drama lived and worked within a few minutes' walk of one another. The coffee shop where slave ship captains collected their mail, for instance, was just around the corner from the Quaker bookstore.

Whenever you vividly reconstruct a scene you weren't present for, you want to be sure that readers know you're not making anything up. Readers should know that every important detail you use must have a source. Sometimes you can do that unobtrusively in the text itself, by making clear who later recalled that it was a dark and stormy night or that the Duke was scowling. When writing books you have the luxury of source notes. The first few books I wrote were without source notes, but my more recent books have included them. I've become more and more a partisan of source notes. If your writing includes a lot of vivid detail and the book reads like a novel, readers may assume that you're inventing things. It's important to show that you aren't, that every crucial detail—especially every quote—has a source.

A Reconstructed Scene

ADAM HOCHSCHILD

"Went to town on my mare to attend a committee of the Slave Trade now instituted," confided Dillwyn to his diary as he headed for the first meeting, on the afternoon of May 22, 1787 at James Phillips's bookstore and printing shop. Phillips's neighbors in George Yard included a Mr. Mussard, who gave dancing and fencing lessons, and a pub, the George and Vulture. From descriptions of similar establishments at this time we can imagine the printing shop itself. Type would be sitting in slanted wooden trays with compartments for the different letters; the compositors who lined it up into rows, letter by letter, would be working, as the day ended, by the light of tallow candles whose smoke, over the decades, would blacken the ceiling. The printers, operating a flatbed press by hand, would take the large sheets from the press, each with many pages printed on it, and use a special pole-like instrument to hang them up on dozens of overhead lines for the ink to dry. Around the sides of the room, stacks of dried sheets, the latest

antislavery book or Quaker tract, would await folding and binding. And finally, the most distinctive thing about an eighteenth-century printing shop was its smell. To ink the type as it sat on the bed of the press, printers used a wool-stuffed leather pad with a wooden handle. Because of its high ammonia content, the most convenient solvent to rinse off the ink residue that built up on these pads was printers' urine. The pads soaked in buckets of this, then strewn on the slightly sloping floor, where printers stepped on them as they worked, to wring them out and let the liquid drain away.

These were the unlikely surroundings in which twelve men gathered, the Quakers in their broad-brimmed, high-crowned black hats. The minutes of the occasion, only one page long, are in Clarkson's clear and flowing handwriting. They begin with a simple declaration: "At a Meeting held for the Purpose of taking the Slave Trade into Consideration, it was resolved that the said Trade was both impolitic and unjust."

An excerpt from Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves by Adam Hochschild.

Setting the Scene

MARK KRAMER

Set scenes in narrative writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, should foster the reader's sense of immediacy. It is kinesthetic: You write, "She had a mishap," and readers feel nothing. But if you write, "She stepped out into nothing and pitched downstairs," readers feel it in their stomachs. You write, "She smells roses," and readers do, too. You write, "She blinked in the bright light," and we squint. Set scenes im-plicate the reader in the action. Strong scene-setting includes several features beyond specifying action, dialogue, and detail; here are a few of them.

Camera and Microphone Control

Purposefully or not, the author sets out the camera and microphone—might as well put them where they help most. They are often set in one spot, but they can move—say, to the shoulder of a main character. The author may reset the range but must do it with care.

and intention, as filmmakers do. For example, you can move from the inside to the outside of a house, but it won't do to mix these locations in the same shot. Slow motion and fast motion are possible, too, as are blinding whiteouts.

Sense of Volume

Try to array details and events so that readers experience the location in three dimensions. You can write, "Out past the window, a tree waved in the wind," or "She spoke from across a room."

Austere Timing

Start your scenes at the last possible instant, cutting out all action tangential to the main point, and end them as soon after the action as possible. Such clean use of scene-setting usually happens in the final drafts of writing, because the writer must have a precise sense of the work's flow and destination.

Emotional Weight

Scenes can convey and authenticate irrational, emotional, and nuanced information more efficiently than can explanation. As a writer you should explore the power of sharing complexity with your readers. Opening up readers' comprehension in this way is liberating. Set scenes also convey a level of accuracy ("stuff" does happen) that scene-free writing can only point toward.

When I need to include a scene that I didn't observe but must glean from interviews, I say to the people I'm interviewing: "Listen, the next fifteen minutes of our conversation will be hard work, not normal conversation. I want you to work with me, please, as though we are two carpenters. I need parts to assemble." They aren't hap- lessly yammering while I take things down but become complicit helpers in building the scene. They create the story *with* me. I inter- view helpful sources first, to get the basics of what happened, and then move on to adversarial sources.

The best scenes grow from fine-grained research. Even observed scenes are often partial reconstructions, including information and detail you don't catch at the time of the events.

The final section of my book *Three Farms* focuses on a twenty-thousand-acre parcel of a huge corporate farm in California. Though I knew the farm, I was kept under a rather tight watch. I had even bought new farm-executive-like clothes for my interviews so I would

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blend in with the agricultural executives. I thought perhaps I was passing, but I later found out that the farm manager had told his staff, "Watch out for Kramer. He has communist shoes." I had worn beat-up old shoes in a land of polished wingtips. I learned my lesson: Now I just act like myself no matter who I'm interviewing.

I secured closest access to a mid-level executive, meaning the one who made the hundred-thousand-dollar decisions, not million-dollar ones. After about a year of visiting this farm, there was a financial shake-up, and nearly all of the workers I had followed were fired. I called my insightful editor, Richard Todd at the *Atlantic Monthly*, which was publishing part of the book. "This is a disaster," I told him. He replied, "Is there a liquor store nearby?"

"You want me to drown my sorrows?" I asked.

"No, I want you to buy champagne and celebrate. You'll see."

I wrote up that section of the book, about thirty thousand words, and then flew back to California. I invited five of the former field executives to a meeting and carried in a case of beer. For five hours, stopping and starting, I read them my draft of the entire section about their farm. They corrected every inaccuracy, explained what I had misunderstood, and deepened the scenes with more information. They gave me a great gift.

I had seen a field of carrots being plowed under but hadn't made it past front-office double-talk about the reason for it. It turned out that someone had forgotten to press an executive button on a harvest decision, and the carrots had grown three inches too long for supermarket carrot bags. The farm accountant had calculated that it was cheaper to plow under those hundred million carrots than to trim them all to the appropriate length.

I'd also written an elaborate scene of pruning valuable almond and pistachio trees. They must be tended and irrigated for years before yielding. My new advisors told me the pruning had been done wrong, ruining the trees' yield. And I described a pesticide-spraying scene but hadn't known it was too much of the wrong chemical, a \$300,000 mistake.

These scenes ended up observed *and* re-created, and were much better for it.

Optimal preparation for scene writing begins with reporting specifically to gather the scene-building materials. Re-created and rejected scenes, done with honor and craftsmanship, work wonders. But the strongest, fullest, and most delicately built scenes follow field reporting that is attentive to sensory data, idiosyncratic quotes, pac-

ing, personality, mood, and odd but telling detail. Then you have everything, and through cunning selection you can build scenes that are efficient, strong, and simple.

Handling Time

BRUCE DESILVA

Chronology is one of the basic ways that we orient ourselves in the world and in the stories that we tell. In all narrative writing, readers need to sense time passing but must not get lost in time. If readers suddenly don't know whether a week or a year has passed, they stop reading. Too often, writers keep the clock ticking and the calendar moving in clunky ways, such as beginning each section with a time stamp. This works well only when time is intrinsic to the story—as in a recounting of the space shuttle disaster. Dropping time markers in unobtrusively works better.

In "Storm Gods and Heroes," a serial narrative about a Coast Guard rescue at sea, Associated Press writer Todd Lewan slipped in a time marker this way: "Kalt's going over the checklist in his mind when Le Feuvre's voice crackles over the intercom. 'We're launching, boys, hang on.' They are on the scene 49 minutes later, in complete darkness."

Writers often convey the passage of time by invoking the physical world. Shadows move across the floor in a room; the morning sunlight comes through one window, by afternoon, through another window; the room grows dark. A story that occurs over several months or a year can include other markers: dry leaves falling, the opening of the baseball season.

Speeding and slowing time is just as important as marking it. This technique is best explained by example. Tim Dahlberg, an AP correspondent, wrote about a horrific crime and the police work required to solve it:

At first they thought it was a baby doll burned and blackened, covered still by bits of red, white, and blue baby outfit. It sat upright with stiff arms outstretched, as if it were reaching to the heavens.

And Alan Kessler saw it first, amid a busted-up TV and some other trash in a ravine outside the sprawling Orem Ranch. He

rode by and was almost up the other side of the ravine when his son, J. B., riding behind him, cried out.

"Dad it's a baby."

"It's just a doll," replied Kessler. "You've got to get across the pasture to round up calves."

"No, no. It's a baby."

Late afternoon, the sun cast long shadows as Kessler got off his horse and with the ranch hand Robert Green, approached the tiny figure. Unbelieving, he watched as Green took a pen from his pocket and touched its shiny, blackened face. The skin gave and fluids leaked out.

Kessler rode to the ranch to call the sheriff.

It was October 9, 1990, and nearly six years would pass before the world would come to know the baby's name and how she came to this desolate place.

The piece begins slowly, the reader riding down the ravine with the men. Once the reader understands what the men have found, the writer speeds time, moving to the next key moment in the story. The writing shifts from dramatic narrative, with dialogue and visual detail, to expository narrative simply imparting information.

Sequencing: Text as Line

TOM FRENCH

Sequence is intrinsic to text. A person looking at a photograph or a painting receives the information within a frame. The eye might move to different parts of the rectangle, but all the information is presented at the same time. Readers, on the other hand, receive information sequentially. The act of narrative writing is arranging the elements of each sentence, each paragraph, each section, along a line. The skillful writer arranges a line that the reader can follow easily.

This line, the reader's sequential experience, is narrative's basic element. Many of the writing rules we learn are intended to maintain the line's integrity. Take, for example, Use adjectives or adverbs sparingly. Too many of them clutter that line, distracting the reader from

the action expressed by the subject, verb, and object. Many of the questions a writer asks herself as she constructs a story are sequence questions on a larger scale. How do I introduce the primary characters? In what order? How can I be sure people will remember who the characters are? How do I plant a plot element early in the story? How do I build a scene? How do I create surprise?

Here are seven principles about sequence to keep in mind as you strive to maintain a clean line.

★ Principle #1: Study the natural sequence first. ★

All action, whether it unfolds over five minutes, a day, or several years, has a natural sequence. With every story, a daily article or a long series, I ask myself: What was the natural sequence of events? I study how the event unfolded chronologically. I usually don't end up writing the story in that order, but I must know how everything happened before I can determine how best to present it.

Usually, you can't just re-create the natural sequence on the page. Even if you are writing an obviously chronological story, such as "a day in the life of the mayor," you aren't going to tell every moment of her day. You will choose particular moments and then transition from one to the next, emphasizing some more than others.

The further you get from the natural sequence as you write, the more artifice you must use to keep your narrative moving. Transitions are often difficult to write because they represent deviations from the natural sequence. New writers sometimes think they must tell a story out of its natural sequence to make it more interesting. Most of the time the natural sequence is very interesting. Sometimes it's the perfect way to tell the story.

★ Principle #2: Report and write along a clear, simple line. ★

In the excerpt below, from an article titled "Give and Take on the Road to Somewhere," writer David Finkel describes what happened after a farmer drove a tractor into a Kosovo refugee camp to give out food. It appeared in the *Washington Post* on April 6, 1999.

Out goes more bread, out go bottles of water. Out go cartons of milk. "Milk for my child," a woman calls out. Now someone tries to climb into the cart, and once he does other people try, and now people seem to be everywhere at once, trying to climb into the cart, onto the tractor, onto the tires, working their way toward the food however they can. They are slipping. They are

falling against one another. They are screaming. They are pushing. A week earlier they were in their homes and now they are so desperate for food that the people bringing it are swinging bottles of water at them to try to bring them under control.

But they can't bring them under control.

"For children, for children," a woman is shouting, arms out, trying to reach the cart. She is wearing earrings, a headband and a sweater, and when she can't reach the cart she brings her hands to her head and covers her ears because behind her is her daughter, perhaps 8, holding on to her, getting crushed, screaming.

And behind her is another girl, 10 perhaps, wearing a pink jacket decorated with drawings of cats and stars and flowers and, now, mud.

Look at the last sentence's sequence. Finkel designed the whole sentence to lead up to that last word: *mud*. The line allows the reader to see the girl as he did.

He tells the whole story chronologically, along one straight, chronological line, except for one small loop in time: "A week earlier they were in their homes." He loops back to give the reader key information: These people had only recently become refugees. Loops are digressions for the action line that allow you to include essential background information. The key is not placing too much information in the loop: boil down what the reader must know to its very essence.

Principle #3: Zoom in. *Boil what the reader must know to its very essence.*
The refugee situation in Kosovo affected hundreds of thousands. Finkel deliberately zooms in on one small event within the huge crisis: one farmer giving food to one group of refugees.

Deciding which portion of the larger sequence to describe is an essential part of sequencing. The writer can't tell everything without making the story massive, rambling, and untenable. In the example of Finkel's story, if he had wanted to tell everything, he would have had to start with centuries of history and then decades of those refugees' lives. Instead, he took one tiny piece of the sequence, a farmer bringing food on one day, and told the story in real time. I would guess that the entire story unfolded in less than one hour. Finkel's decision to zoom in so tightly gives the story its power.

Principle #4: Open strong, build to better.

Good stories have rising action. If you give away your best material at the beginning of the story, you can't create tension. The funda-

Speed up slow down
MINS ACTION

mental purpose of a narrative's first paragraph is to make the reader continue to the second paragraph. And the purpose of that paragraph is to make him read the third paragraph.

Even in daily newspaper stories, I don't think about a lede, I think about an opening section. It is not useful to think about just your first paragraph, because you don't want the reader to stop at the end of it. The entire opening section must offer an experience that propels the reader forward through your story. Whatever you convey, it will be pointless unless the reader stays with you to the end. To make that happen, your story must get better as it goes. Open with something good. Build toward something even better.

Every sequence has a beginning, middle, and end. We're taught in journalism school that the beginning is the most important part of the sequence. For narrative writing, the ending is most important; the beginning is the second most important.

David Finkel says that when he constructs a story, he decides on his ending and then commences the story as close to that as possible. That allows him to zoom in and keep the sequence tight.

Principle #5: Set the table.

Open with a gun setting

To learn about sequencing, study jokes—the form of storytelling most reliant upon it. To tell a successful joke you must line up each part of it precisely. The punch line falls flat if the teller hasn't successfully sequenced all the crucial elements. In every form of storytelling—books, movies, and even song lyrics—the teller must figure out how to transmit all the crucial information, so the audience makes sense of what follows.

Think of that old writing dictum from Chekhov: *If you show a gun in the first act, it has to go off.* To put it another way: If the story involves a gun going off in Act 2, you had better have introduced it in Act 1. Readers are very savvy, so you must introduce that gun as gracefully as possible. We must set the table before we serve the meal.

In the excerpt below, from my *St. Petersburg Times* series "13" about middle school students, I set up a later conflict between the character Danielle and her parents.

In the pre-dawn darkness, Danielle Heffern's alarm goes off again. She heads into the bathroom, washes her face and brushes her teeth, gets dressed. As usual, she puts on the blue Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. The house is quiet. No one else is up yet.

Every morning her routine is the same. She makes her own

breakfast, packs a lunch for school, heads for her bus. But this morning is different. Danielle doesn't feel like packing a lunch. She wants to buy something; she is thinking about the cheese pizza they sell at the Booker T cafeteria. Last night, she asked her parents if she could have some money. But they said no.

Danielle heads down the hall. She is walking through the family room when she notices some spare change on the end table. She counts the coins: \$1.55.

She picks up the money and puts it in her purse. She gets her backpack and leaves the house, locking the door behind her.

This scene set up the situation and leaves the reader wondering: Will her parents find out? How will they respond? It is a tiny conflict but powerful enough to draw the reader through the story.

Principle #6: Slow down.

After you have built tension in your story, slow down to maintain it. As the world around us moves faster and faster, this technique becomes even more powerful. If you build your scene properly, the reader will hold still and look carefully at anything you wish.

Learning how and when to speed up and to slow down is key. It's something of a paradox: Speed up when explaining boring (but essential) information, and when the action is moving rapidly—your very best material—slow down. You slow down so the reader can enter the scene and process what is happening. You speed up because you have a lot of ground to cover.

How do you slow down? Allow more space on the page. Use more paragraph breaks. Find natural pauses inside the scene. You might be inclined to skip over them, but they can help you slow down the pace. A story that I worked on about a murder included a police chase. The police started shooting out the tires of the escape car. As the car began to spin, the music on the car's CD player stopped. I included that pause in the music to draw out that suspense-filled moment.

Principle #7: Learn to crescendo. *CR E 7 UENDO*

At the end of your story or the end of every section of a longer story, your narrative must crescendo. It doesn't have to be a loud moment; quiet moments are often more powerful.

Here is another example from David Finkel, a daily story that he wrote while at the *St. Petersburg Times*, on the day that Ted Bundy was executed. The story was about the parents of one of Bundy's victims, Margaret Bowman. Here are the last several paragraphs:

The TV went off. In the quiet, Jack Bowman regained his composure and then headed outside. He wanted the day to go by easily and the night to go easily, too. He wanted to sleep soundly. He wanted to awaken and sense that Ted Bundy was already beginning to be old news. He wanted the vengeful signs of strangers to be thrown in the trash and their firecrackers put away. He wanted to finally get to the point where at last he could think about everything that had happened.

Tuesday, for a short time, he tried.

"Tell me your feelings about the execution," someone said to him.

"I wanted him punished," Jack Bowman said. "This was not hard for me."

"Tell me about Margaret," he was asked.

He began to cry. He shut his eyes. "I don't think I can."

Writing narrative is like rendering a complex piece of music on the page. The writer hears it and then must reproduce it. For the reader to really hear it, too, each note—each component of your story—must be struck in a way that develops the reader's experience of the text.

to many connections to music

Writing Complicated Stories

LOUISE KIERNAN

People sometimes ask me, "Are you an investigative reporter, or a features reporter, or an explanatory reporter?" I never know how to answer. Why ask at all? Categorizing journalism is in part why many investigative stories are dull, feature stories can be superficial, and explanatory stories explain so little. For complicated stories, we need to combine all three. This blending is both my central goal and biggest challenge as a reporter.

In June 2000, I wrote a front-page story for the *Chicago Tribune* about a woman named Ana Flores, who was killed by a piece of glass that fell from a building. The story, a Pulitzer finalist, begins with this image: "The glass falls like a shadow, swift and silent, a dark blur swooping through the wet sky."

The image of the shadow didn't come from observation or creative license, but from a police report, which I also used to track down