

Scene and Summary

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."
Anton Chekhov

One of the best known aphorisms about writing is 'Show, don't tell.' What this means is that a story will engage the reader if it is dramatised in a scene, like a film, in real time with action and dialogue. It's the difference between being told what someone is like and seeing it for yourself. It is never satisfactory for the reader if they are getting information second hand from the author. As a reader I don't want to be told someone is beautiful or charming or stupid or manipulative. I want to watch them in action, see what they have to say, witness how they treat other characters and make my own mind up about them. Also, remember that 'seeing is believing', so the reader will 'see' scenes you have dramatised.

'Seeing' here also includes the other senses. When you describe sounds, smells, textures, tastes, it engages all the reader's senses. Experiments have shown that when a person listens to sensory descriptions the part of their brain that experiences sensory stimuli lights up, as though they are themselves having the experience. In effect your reader is recreating your character's sensory experience in their own body. This is a very effective tool for bringing your writing and your characters to life.

Scene

Dramatising involves *showing* your character in a particular place (which you need to create for us, however briefly), in action, and possibly interacting with other characters. We need to get a sense of the character – their age and background, their level of education, social class and attitude. There may be other characters present; if so, we need to get a sense of them too. This can be conveyed through authorial description, their speech and actions or through the filter of your protagonist's reactions, thoughts and feelings. And, of course, something needs to happen that furthers the plot.

It sounds like a lot to juggle and there are many decisions to be made, about point of view, about whether to stay in the present or reveal a character's past, through memory or flashback, how much to describe and how much to leave to the reader's imagination. It is worth studying dramatised scenes by writers you admire, line by line, to see how they do it, and maybe even using their scene as a template to try writing a scene of your own.

Jacob Ross, author of 'Pynter Bender', in his novel masterclass, suggests copying out the same passage by a writer you admire every day for a month, to absorb and internalise the rhythms.

Summary

A summary is a précis of events, giving the reader a quick idea of something that has happened. Never cheat the reader by summarising a scene that is crucial to developing the plot. For example, if you build up to the characters falling in love the reader will feel cheated if you bring them together offstage and summarise it afterwards. Having waited and wished for this culmination, the reader wants the satisfaction of seeing the climax played out before their eyes.

Keep summaries brief. A summary is just information, and we tend to forget information because it is words, not images. If you want something to stick, create an image. Avoid long summaries, which will lose the reader because our brains cannot absorb so much data and we are held by the story, not by dense passages of information. Summaries can be brought to life by adding in some sensory detail, so 'She had worked every summer as a lifeguard' could be changed to 'She remembered those long hot chlorine-soaked summers she had spent working as a lifeguard.' (John Updike) Notice this also gives us a visual image of a swimming pool rather than the beach.

Which to use when?

Despite what I've said above, there is no point in dramatising anything that does not further the plot. Some people think that every scene in the present narrative should be dramatised and all flashbacks to the past summarised. However, if you are simply giving background information so that the reader understands something that is happening, you can briefly summarise it, rather than spending time putting it into dialogue. For example, in a dramatised scene in which a married couple are quarrelling over her latest speeding ticket, the reader may need to know that she has a history of speeding. Rather than extending the dialogue to cover this, which could be both tedious and contrived, since they both know it already, this could be revealed in a simple authorial summary. *'This was the third ticket Jill had been given in less than a year.'* Or it could be summarised in her husband's thoughts. *'Not again. One more and she was going to lose her license. And maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing.'*

Anything causal, even if it happened before the start of the book, should be revealed in dramatised flashbacks, not summaries, because they explain why things happened the way they did.

Example: *The protagonist, a soldier, is suffering from PTSD, and is asked by the military police to return to the remote place where he was rescued but his companions died, in order to explain what really happened. While there he starts to remember the events that led to his companions' deaths.*

In this case, it would be more effective to replay (dramatise or show) the scene as it actually happened or as he remembers it happening, than to summarise (tell) it to the reader, because it is the solution to the mystery. But there is no point in dramatising their entire journey there if nothing interesting happens, unless you can use the journey to build suspense by telling us, for example, what is happening the protagonist's head as he anticipates returning to the scene of his trauma.

If something happening now is going to cause an effect later in the book, dramatise it, even if it seems unimportant at this time. 'If you give us information by summarising it, we will understand it but we will probably not remember it. If you dramatise (show it) we will remember it; it's how writers place clues in detective novels - they show us something we don't understand at the time but will remember later. Images, sensory detail and emotions stay in the mind, which is one of the reasons given for the theory that people learn (or retain) more history from novels than they do from history books.

Keeping the Action Moving

The same principles apply to detail. Elaborately describing every character and scene will make the pace and intensity feel the same and give them all the same weight. Save detailed descriptions for places where you need to build atmosphere or slow the pace. If descriptions are coming through the narrator they need to be consistent with the narrator's frame of mind. If a man is driving along a street and you describe every shop window and person on the pavement, we will assume he is on the look out for something. It will add an unwarranted importance to an incidental scene. Details should be there for a reason: in real life a dropped pen may mean nothing, but in a film it will mean something - perhaps the character is developing an illness, or is startled and trying to conceal it. Description slows the pace, so save detail for important scenes where you want the reader to be immersed in the action in real time, and skip over transitional scenes which are getting them from one place to another - or cut them altogether. (For more on this read the bit on 'jump cuts' in [Narrative Time](#).)