

# Scene and Sequel -- Torture Your Characters With a Purpose!

*By Ann Charles, Jacquie Rogers, and Wendy Delaney*

## Story Basics

Most successful fiction has a structure of interconnected scenes so that your story unfolds in a dramatic and logical way to meet reader expectation.

What do readers want?

- A story about a viewpoint character facing a significant change
- A story question to worry about
- Resolution -- the story question is answered at the end of the story
- Relevance -- every scene relates to the story question

Story is about cause and effect, stimulus and response in the "now" that propels a viewpoint character forward to solve a story problem. Why? Because this character wants something important (the Story Goal), and has good reason to pursue it (Motivation). But there is opposition (Conflict). Why? Because there are motivated characters in the story with opposing goals.

Once the reader meets the viewpoint character with the story goal, a question is formed in the reader's mind: Will the character achieve her goal? Something then sparks the story (Inciting Incident) and propels the character into action to achieve that story goal.

How do we build a story that will keep our reader turning pages to The End, where the story question is answered? With scene (action) and sequel (reaction).

## Story Structure Using Scene and Sequel

### Definitions

**Scene: A segment of story action, written moment-by-moment, without summary, presented in the story "now."**

Scene elements:

- **Goal** - that relates to the story goal, that is specific and immediate
- **Conflict** - opposition that will keep the character from achieving that goal
- **Disaster** - a logical but unanticipated setback--the hook that keeps the reader turning the page to find out what the character will do next

**Sequel: A unit of transition that links two scenes.**

Sequel elements:

- **Reaction** - emotional reaction to the disaster/setback that transitions into thought
- **Dilemma** - review → analysis → planning -- character is working through a process to decide what to do next
- **Decision** - a decision is made -- character has a new short-term goal, a logical next step in pursuit of the story goal

Sequel is the bridge, where you can reveal the viewpoint character's emotions and thought process that moves that character into the action of the next scene. It's where you seek reader identification with the character's plight.

Sequels are flexible and should be as in depth or as brief as needed to tell your story and allow your reader to feel what the viewpoint character is feeling.

For example, if a scene in a mystery novel ends with the viewpoint character running into a dead end (disaster) because she was chasing a false clue, the sequel may be a one-line decision to go back and talk to the person who gave her the bad information. The transition line might begin with, "A half hour later...." This is where you should summarize to "tell" only what is essential.

If the scene setback is emotionally loaded (i.e. with a significant physical or emotional wound), it should logically evoke an emotional response from the character. Breezing through that reaction time and transitioning to a line like, "A half hour later..." not only robs your reader of the emotional impact of that scene, it won't "feel" like an appropriate or believable response.

## **Building a Story**

"A story is a chain of scenes and sequels." *Dwight Swain*

Using Scene (Goal, Motivation, Conflict) and Sequel (Reaction, Dilemma, Decision), move your viewpoint character into action so that scene by scene, chapter by chapter, the stakes get higher and tension builds (because you're continuously "torturing" your characters), leading toward the story climax and the resolution of the story goal.

How do you do this?

If you're a plotter, once you've identified your characters' goals and motivations, you might want to create a plot outline using Scene and Sequel.

If you are a more "organic" writer who prefers to let the story unfold as you write, you might choose to employ the elements of Scene and Sequel as you need to make logical story decisions.

Our advice: Do what works best for you and the story you have to tell. But always (ALWAYS!) make your scenes serve a purpose.

## Scene and Sequel Planner

**Scene** (describe the purpose of this scene):

**Viewpoint character:**

**Goal:** (What does he/she want?)

**Conflict:** (What keeps him/her from achieving the scene goal?)

**Disaster:** (What is the setback--the result of the conflict?)

**Sequel:** (describe the logical reaction to the Scene disaster):

**Reaction:** (What is the emotional reaction? Intellectual reaction?)

**Dilemma:** (What are the options available to him/her?)

**Decision:** (What action will he/she take next? This is the new goal)

## Appendix

### Reference books:

- Dwight V. Swain, *Techniques of the Selling Writer* ISBN 0-8061-1191-7
- Jack Bickham, *Scene & Structure* ISBN: 0-89879-551-6
- Debra Dixon, *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict* ISBN: 0-9654371-0-8

## Bios

### **Ann Charles**

Ann Charles is a bestselling author who writes romantic mysteries that are splashed with humor. She has been awarded the Daphne du Maurier for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense, the Romance Writers of America Golden Heart, and Suspense Magazine's Best of 2012 Books. She has a B.A. in English with an emphasis on creative writing from the University of Washington. When she is not dabbling in fiction, arm-wrestling with her children, attempting to seduce her husband, or arguing with her sassy cat, she is standing on her workshop soapbox, sharing what she has learned from her many marketing experiments over the years. Visit her at [www.anncharles.com](http://www.anncharles.com) or [www.anncharles.com/deadwood](http://www.anncharles.com/deadwood). You can also find her hanging out on Facebook or Twitter (as *Deadwood Violet* or *AnnWCharles*).

### **Jacquie Rogers**

Jacquie Rogers has dabbled in many diverse careers, but has always been a bookworm. She grew up on a dairy farm outside of Homedale, Idaho, in Owyhee County where her *Hearts of Owyhee* series is set. The first in the series, **Much Ado About Marshals**, won the 2012 RttA for Best Western Romance. Jacquie's a member of Romance Writers of America and Western Fictioneers, teaches classes in both writing craft and research topics, and is passionate about building a broader audience for the western genre. Her latest release is **Sleight of Heart**, the first of the *High-Stakes Heroes* series. She has two November releases: a short story in **Wolf Creek, Book 9: A Wolf Creek Christmas** (Western Fictioneers), and another short story in **Wishing for a Cowboy** (Prairie Rose Publications). The fourth book in the *Hearts of Owyhee* series, **Much Ado About Miners**, is due out in mid-November.  
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### **Wendy Delaney**

Award winning author Wendy Delaney writes fun cozy mysteries, but true to her romance roots, she's determined to give her sleuth her happily ever after. Ideally, many books from now, at the end of Wendy's *Working Stiffs Mystery* series that recently debuted with **Trudy, Madly, Deeply**. A long-time member of RWA and Sisters in Crime, she enjoys sharing her knowledge and experience in workshops throughout the Pacific Northwest. Wendy makes her home in the Seattle area with her husband and has two grown sons. Find her on Facebook and at [wendy@wendydelaney.com](mailto:wendy@wendydelaney.com).