

Scene in Nonfiction

“The extraordinary power [of literary journalism] was derived from just four devices...The basic one was scene-by-scene construction, telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative.”

Tom Wolfe in The New Journalism

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUMMARY, DESCRIPTION, AND SCENE

| Summary | Description | Scene |
|---|---|---|
| The crowd began to thin as the reunion wound down, and for the first time all night, the line at the cash bar disappeared. That’s where I saw Lori Jo Flink, and that’s where we spoke for the last time. | The Sheraton Hotel, where the reunion was held, was chosen for its cavernous rooms and sprawling parking lots. The ballroom was now nearly empty, and the tables were littered with abandoned glasses along with a few coffee cups that read “Class of 1970.” | Hands thrust in my pockets, I stood facing Lori Jo as she held her wine glass against her chest. The bartender, to my right, raised an eyebrow. “Can I get you something?” he said. I nodded, and pointed to a bottle of Chardonnay. “Are you happy?” I said to Lori Jo, and immediately regretted it. She laughed, throwing her head back, and said yes, she thought so. |

BUILDING A SCENE

In early drafts of narratives, we often summarize events, largely to get the story out. In revision, we return to the story and make decisions about what events we should linger over, developing description, scene, or both. But not all narrative events are equally important. How do you decide?

- **Significant event.** What is the inciting incident that caused the “trouble” that, in turn, gave rise to the story? This might be developed into a scene.
- **Character development.** As in fiction, one of the best ways to reveal the qualities and quirks of character, including the narrator’s, is by *showing* them in action.
- **Showing how it felt.** Emotions are easily summarized. When dramatized through scene, emotions are *experienced* by readers, which is much more powerful.
- **Relevant exhibits or evidence.** Develop narrative moments that are relevant to the idea the writer is exploring—events and situations that might be examined for possible meanings, or examples that can be dramatized to make a point.

NOTES ON TECHNIQUE

- **Establish the shot** (“I watched him from the couch, lumbering toward me”)
- **Develop in three dimensions** (“The bartender to my right, raised an eyebrow, and behind me was the murmer”)
- **Create a sensory context** (“Through the cracked window, I heard the muffled roar of the lake, thrown into a frenzy by the northeaster”)

- **Contrast elements** (“The single candle flame pierced the darkness of the kitchen”)
- **Make something happen** (“Shuffling with my right leg, I began to cry”)
- **Someone or something changes** (“I sighed and sank into the chair. I understood”)
- **Bring in voices through dialogue**
- **Emphasize the telling details** (“The brown medicine bottles were neatly arranged on the bedside table, from smallest to largest”)

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Think about current drafts you’re working on, and identify a scene that could be developed further drawing on some of the techniques discussed here. Spend ten minutes working on it.
2. Develop a scene that focuses on a conflict with a family member (see pp. 56-58 in *Crafting Truth*).
3. Develop a scene that focuses on a “turning point” (see pp. 104-105 in *Crafting Truth*).
4. Experiment with crafting a scene from historical research, in this case on Babe Ruth’s homerun record one day in 1927 (see pp. 149-151 in *Crafting Truth*).