DESMOND SHUFFLES THE CARDS

Index cards for building and rearranging scenes

Published 1 November 2026 · 5 min read

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Desmond Fairweather bought five hundred index cards, three packs of drawing pins and a corkboard the size of a garden gate.

He was writing a comic novel about a brass band from a small mining town that enters a national competition, against the wishes of its conductor, its sponsors and, for a while, most of its members. He had a lot of scenes. He was fairly sure they were in the wrong order. He had no idea what the right order was.

The corkboard went up in the back bedroom. The cards went into a neat stack beside it.

Desmond wrote "Scene 1: The band hall roof leaks during rehearsal" on the first card, pinned it to the top left corner of the board, and felt, for the first time in months, like a man in charge of his own book.

One scene, one card

The basic method is simple. Write each scene of your novel on its own card, with just enough information to remember what happens. Then lay the cards out in order, on a table, a floor or a board.

Keep each card brief. A short description of what happens is usually enough, perhaps with the viewpoint character's name and a note about what changes by the end of the scene. If you can't fit the scene on a card, it might be two scenes.

The point isn't to write the book on cards. It's to make the whole structure of the book small enough to see at once.

Why cards work

On a page, a novel is long and linear. You can only see the part you're looking at, and moving a scene means cutting and pasting chunks of text and hoping nothing breaks.

On cards, the whole book is spread out in front of you. You can stand back and look at it. You can see that the first third is crowded and the last third thin. You can pick a scene up and try it somewhere else, and if it doesn't work, put it back.

Cards are cheap, and that makes them brave. It's far easier to experiment with a structure when the cost of being wrong is a drawing pin.

Lay them out in rows

Many writers arrange their cards in rows or columns that match the broad parts of the story. Desmond used four rows: the band's decision to enter, the disastrous preparations, the regional heats and the national final.

Once the cards were up, the shape of the book became clear. The second row had twenty-six cards. The third had four.

The middle of his novel was a very long rehearsal, and the regional heats, the moment the band finally faced competition, were over in a blur. No wonder the book felt lopsided. He'd been able to feel it while writing, but he couldn't see why until the cards made it visible.

Shuffle, swap and cut

With the cards on the board, Desmond began moving things.

He combined three rehearsal scenes that were doing the same job into one. He moved the scene where the euphonium player admits she can't read music from early in the book to the night before the regional heats, where it suddenly mattered enormously. He took the conductor's resignation, which happened offstage, and gave it a card of its own.

Some cards he took down entirely and put in a shoebox labelled "Maybe." Cutting a scene is less painful when it's just been moved to a box rather than deleted forever. Some of those cards came back later. Most didn't.

Mark the gaps

Cards are just as useful for showing what's missing.

When two scenes sit side by side and the jump between them feels too sudden, put a blank card in the gap. Write a question on it: "How does the band raise the money?" or "When does Gareth forgive his brother?" These blank cards become a to-do list for the next draft.

Desmond's board ended up with eleven blank cards scattered through it. They looked rather like missing teeth, but they told him exactly where to write next.

Add a little colour

Some writers use different coloured cards for different viewpoint characters, subplots or moods. Others add a coloured dot to the corner. It isn't necessary, but it can show patterns at a glance.

Desmond used pink cards for scenes that were mainly comic and blue for scenes with real emotional weight. When he stepped back, the whole of row one was pink. The jokes were working, but the reader had been given no reason yet to care whether the band won. He moved the scene where the oldest cornet player explains why the band matters to him from row two into row one, and the board, and the book, both looked better for a patch of blue.

Paper or screen

Several writing programs offer virtual index cards on a digital corkboard, and they work well, especially if your cards are linked to the actual text. Many writers still prefer physical cards, because they can stand back from a wall or spread them across the floor. Either approach does the same job.

By the end of the month, the board had four rows of roughly even length, eleven questions waiting to be answered and a stack of rejected cards in the shoebox.

Desmond's wife put her head round the door and asked how it was going.

"I've moved the euphonium," he said.

She nodded as though that made complete sense. In the back bedroom, it did.

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