GIVE EVERY SCENE A REASON TO STAY

Revising scenes before you publish

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Martin had written a lovely breakfast scene.

The toast was golden. The kitchen smelled of coffee. Outside, a robin hopped along the fence with the confidence of a bird who owned the property.

Four pages later, his detective was still deciding whether to have another egg.

A scene can be beautifully written and still need assistance. During revision, the question is what this particular stretch of lived experience contributes to the book. Good atmosphere matters. So do relationships, discoveries and the difficult business of making up one's mind. A scene earns space through its effect on the reader and the unfolding story.

FIND THE SMALL ENGINE

Start with the viewpoint character: the person whose perceptions guide us through the scene. What do they want right now?

The desire can be modest. A daughter wants her father to admit he opened her letter. A new employee wants to survive lunch without revealing that she cannot remember the manager's name. Martin's detective wants to finish breakfast without discussing the case with his landlady.

An objective gives the scene direction. The character need not announce it or even fully understand it. As the revising author, however, you should be able to identify what draws them forward.

Next, ask what makes that desire difficult. Conflict can arise from another person's aims, circumstances or an internal struggle. It does not require raised voices. A landlady setting down a second cup may be enough to defeat a man's plans for solitude.

Make the difficulty particular. "He feels uncomfortable" gives you little to work with. "She has found the missing witness's glove in his coat" offers several possibilities, none especially restful.

CHECK WHAT CHANGES

Compare the beginning and ending. Does the character gain information, lose an opportunity, make a decision, damage trust or understand something differently?

The change need not be a reversal worthy of orchestral accompaniment. A friend agreeing to accept help can matter enormously. What counts is whether the scene alters our understanding or the possibilities ahead.

Try a plain sentence: "At first, he believes ____. By the end, he ____, so now ____."

For Martin's breakfast: at first, the detective thinks he has concealed the witness's visit. By the end, he knows the landlady saw her leave. Now he must decide whether to trust the landlady with the truth.

The second egg can remain. It now sits beside a consequential conversation.

ALLOW ROOM FOR QUIET

This test is a diagnostic tool, not a law requiring every scene to end in disaster. After a loss, a character may need time to absorb what happened. A quiet scene can deepen grief, establish intimacy or allow a new intention to form.

Look for development within that quiet. Perhaps a widower finally enters the greenhouse his partner tended. Nothing explodes. He waters the seedlings. The action suggests a small commitment to the future that his earlier refusal made impossible.

If you cut such a scene purely because it contains no confrontation, you may remove the emotional bridge the next event needs. Ask what experience would be missing, as well as what plot information would disappear.

GIVE THE DETAILS A VIEWPOINT

Description helps a scene feel inhabited. Select details through the viewpoint character's concerns rather than cataloguing everything available.

A hungry traveller and a building inspector can enter the same inn and form very different opinions about the ceiling. One notices the smell of stew. The other notices that the ceiling appears to be joining dinner.

Keep details that orient us, create the intended mood or reveal something meaningful. You do not have to make every teacup a clue. Nor must you supply the full service simply because you researched antique porcelain.

BEWARE OF THE SAME SCENE TWICE

A manuscript may contain three conversations establishing that a brother is unreliable. Repetition can develop a pattern, but each return should add pressure, complexity or consequence.

In the first conversation, he breaks a promise. In the second, his sister covers for him. In the third, she refuses. That sequence develops a relationship. Three versions of "You always let me down" may simply hold it in place.

When you find repetition, decide whether to compress it, combine its strongest parts or change the later scene so it advances the situation.

REVISE ONE SCENE IN PRACTICE

Choose a scene you regularly skim. Write its objective, obstacle, change and contribution to the book. Then mark the point where its meaningful action begins and where its effect is complete.

You may discover that two pages of arrival precede the real encounter, or that the final paragraph explains an emotion the action already conveys. Try a version that starts later or ends sooner. Save the original so the experiment stays an experiment.

Reread the surrounding pages. Removing an arrival must not leave readers unsure where they are. Moving a revelation changes what people can plausibly say next.

This is self-revision, and it costs no more than attention. A critique partner can tell you where engagement faded; a developmental editor can assess scene patterns across the manuscript within an agreed service. Neither response removes your responsibility to judge the scene's intended effect.

Martin's detective can enjoy his breakfast. Give him something to discover, risk, resist or finally admit while he eats it.

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