WALTER STORYBOARDS THE SLOWEST CHASE IN FICTION

Sketching key scenes before you write them

Published 1 November 2026 · 5 min read

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The climax of Walter Pim's novel was a chase along a canal.

His hero, a retired lock-keeper named Arthur, was pursuing a stolen narrowboat containing his granddaughter's wedding ring, two smugglers and a rather distressed spaniel. Walter had written the scene four times. Every version was a muddle. Boats seemed to swap places. The

spaniel was on board, then on the towpath, then on board again. In one draft, Arthur overtook the narrowboat on foot, then fell behind it, then was mysteriously ahead again at the next lock.

Walter had been a signwriter for forty years, and he thought best with a brush in his hand. So he put down his pen, took out a sketchbook, and began to draw the chase as if it were a comic strip.

What a storyboard is

In film and animation, a storyboard is a series of drawings showing each shot of a scene, in order, a bit like a comic. It lets the director plan what the audience will see before anyone switches on a camera.

Novelists don't have cameras, but they do have a reader's attention, which works in a similar way. In each moment of a scene, the reader is looking at something. A storyboard helps you decide what that is, and in what order.

For most scenes in a novel, it's unnecessary. For complicated action, for scenes with many characters moving at once or for any moment where you keep losing track of who is where, it can be extraordinarily helpful.

You don't need to draw well

Walter's drawings were skillful

. Yours don't need to be.

Stick figures are perfectly good. So are boxes, arrows and labels. The point is not to produce art, but to see the scene as a sequence of moments. A storyboard that a stranger couldn't understand is still useful if it makes sense to you.

Draw a row of rectangles across a page, like the frames of a comic. In each frame, sketch one moment of the scene. Underneath, write a few words about what happens or what's said.

Break the scene into beats

The first thing a storyboard forces you to do is divide a scene into its individual moments, sometimes called beats.

Walter's chase, when he drew it, broke down into nineteen frames. The narrowboat pulls away from the mooring. Arthur sees it from the bridge. He runs down the steps to the towpath. The spaniel barks from the roof. And so on.

Drawing them one at a time showed him where the confusion had crept in. Between frames six and seven, in his draft, the narrowboat had passed through a lock. On paper, he could see that a lock takes time, and someone has to operate it. The smugglers would have had to stop. Arthur, a former lock-keeper, would have known exactly how long that took.

That wasn't a problem to fix. It was the heart of the scene.

Decide where the reader is looking

Each frame of a storyboard has a point of view. Is the reader close to the character's face, or watching from a distance? Are they seeing what the character sees, or something the character can't?

In a novel, this is usually governed by your viewpoint character. If the scene is written from Arthur's perspective, the reader can only see what Arthur sees, hear what he hears and know what he knows. Storyboarding from his point of view made Walter realise that half his draft described things Arthur couldn't possibly have seen, such as the smugglers arguing in the cabin.

He cut them. The scene became tighter, and more frightening, because Arthur no longer knew what was happening inside the boat.

Make the geography clear

Action scenes often fail because the reader can't picture the space. Who is on which side? How far away is the danger? What's in the way?

A storyboard keeps the space consistent. If the narrowboat is on the left in frame three, it should still be on the left in frame four, unless something moves it. Walter drew a small arrow on each frame showing which way the canal flowed, and stopped losing track of which direction anyone was going.

Use the right speed

Storyboarding also helps you control pace. Frames that contain a lot of movement can be written quickly, in short sentences. Frames that hold on a single important moment can be slowed down and expanded.

There was a comedy here, too, which Walter only noticed once it was drawn. Canals in England and Wales commonly have a speed limit of four miles per hour, and many narrowboats are not much faster than a brisk walk anyway. The chase was, technically, at walking pace. A determined retired lock-keeper could keep up quite easily.

Walter decided not to hide this. He leaned into it. Arthur strolls alongside the stolen boat, calmly explaining to the smugglers that the next lock is chained shut, and that he has the key.

From pictures to prose

When the storyboard is finished, write the scene with it open beside you. Work through it frame by frame. Some frames will become a paragraph, some a sentence, some just a word.

You won't use everything. Some frames will turn out to be unnecessary. That's fine. The storyboard has done its job if it shows you what the scene is, who sees what and where everyone is standing.

Walter's fifth draft of the chase was half the length of the first four. The spaniel stayed on the roof throughout, barking at every bridge. The smugglers surrendered at the lock, partly because of the chain and partly, Walter suspected, because of the spaniel.

His own granddaughter read it and asked how he had made a chase at four miles per hour feel so tense.

Walter showed her his sketchbook. Frame fourteen was a small drawing of a padlock, and an old man smiling.

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