



Eleven Questions to Ask When Revising a Scene

Alright, my friends. Welcome. In this video, we're going to look at 11 questions you can ask of a scene to improve it during the revisions process. Now, before we get into our 11 questions, I want to remind you that you've got a couple different ways to implement these 11 questions while revising your manuscript.

So method number 1 is the scene-by-scene approach. So by this approach, you would ask all 11 question of a scene before moving on to the next scene in your overall manuscript.

The next approach is the manuscript sweeps approach. So in this method, you would pick one question from the 11 that we're going to go through in this video, and you would apply that one question to every scene in your manuscript. And then you would start over again, and you would do 11 different sweeps of your manuscript. It sounds like a lot, doing 11 different drafts, but it's actually no more work than the scene-by-scene approach. You're still asking those same 11 questions and revising your manuscript accordingly. You're just doing it in a manner that might give you more of a feeling of forward momentum because you're not spending days and days revising the same scene over and over again.

And then the third method is just the hopscotch method, I call it, just jumping around, applying different questions to different scenes however you are in the mood or whatever you feel like working on that day. It's a less structured approach, and it might be more difficult to keep track of what you've addressed and what you haven't. But some people prefer to focus on where their energy is in any particular day. So that might be the method that's for you.

So let's get to our 11 questions.

1. Does the Scene Turn?

You always want to ask yourself is does the scene turn? And by turn, we mean a polarity shift. Does the scene start in one place and end in another? And so those polarity shifts can be good to bad, or bad to good, or bad to double bad, or good to double good. The point is something needs to happen to change the polarity of the scene. Otherwise, you probably have a scene that's just exposition and nothing has actually happened in it. You also want to be aware of whether your turn is action-based or revelation-based. So an action turn would be some sort of external force has changed the polarity of the scene. Whereas a revelation turn would be the revelation of new information has caused the polarity of the scene to shift. You just want to be aware of whether it's action or revelation so that you're mixing it up a bit and not every scene in your book is turning on action or revelation.

2. Are you using good scene structure?

Now, we have another video that goes into this a little more in depth. It's called Three Brilliant Ways to Write Extraordinary Scenes. So I'll just go over it really quickly here. There's the James Scott Bell LOCK scene structure, which is identifying your lead, your objective, or the lead's objective, the confrontation, and then some sort of knock-out conclusion to the scene. There's the GMCD method, which is your protagonist has a goal, motivation for that goal, some sort of conflict, and then a disaster of some kind that the resolution of the conflict is normally a negative outcome. And then you have Shawn Coyne's Five Commandments of Storytelling where your scene has an inciting incident, progressive complications, crises, climax, and resolution. Now, like I talked about in the other video on scene structure, all of these are going to get you to the same place. The point is, you should be able to apply these structures to your scene and be able to meet these key moments. If you have any of these key moments missing, then something is probably wrong with your scene that's going to need some revisions.

3. How is the scene's pacing?

Are you moving too quickly through important, dramatic moments? If so, you're probably doing some telling when you should be doing some showing. Telling and showing is almost always an issue of pacing. And if things are going too quickly, you're doing too much telling. Are there parts in the scene that are boring or that seem to drag? Well, if so, you're probably showing as opposed to telling when you should be telling. Telling is what we do for the boring parts because it speeds things up. If you also are finding that a portion of the scene is dragging, there's a good chance you're simply dumping in too much exposition. You're just trying to get across too much information to the reader and not focusing enough on the action of the scene itself.

4. Is the scene's opening and closing as strong as they can be?

An easy way to address this is to remember to come into a scene late and leave early. Often we start our scenes way prior to the actual dramatic thrust of the scene, and then we stick around too long and spend too much time on the resolution. So often a scene can be significantly improved simply by cutting off the first few paragraphs and deleting the final few paragraphs as well so you can really focus in on the most dramatic moments. Now, when you're looking at improving the introduction to your scene, you normally want to start with action or with dialog. It's almost always going to be more engaging than beginning a scene with description of some kind.

For example, the setting. You'd much rather start on an action beat to draw the reader in. On the closing of a scene, you want to make sure that you're providing resolution to whatever the major conflict of that scene was. However, you also want to make sure that you're leaving open loops, that's unanswered questions that keep the reader turning pages and wanting to find out what happens next. If you provide a perfect resolution with all the bows neatly tied at the end of a chapter, your reader is going to say, "Oh, great. This is a perfect opportunity for me to put down the book, and turn off the lamp, and go to sleep." And you don't want ever give them a reason to do that.

Now, my favorite thing is to end a scene with the thrust and twist. Now, I don't remember who I learned this from. I got to hunt it down. But the thrust and twist is simply the idea that you want to end the scene by stabbing the reader in the gut and then giving the knife a twist. Like, it's not

enough to just have some sort of like "Ah" moment, like the thrust. Like, "Ah, I've been stabbed." But also want "Oh" like the twist that follows it. So anything I'm revising my scenes, I always take a look and say, "Is there a thrust and twist moment at the closing of a scene here?"

5. How is the scene's dialog?

Now, we have a very in-depth video all about dialog in the training library already, so I'm not going to go over dialog in depth there. But I will say these are kind of the key arguments of that other video. Essentially, that video I tell you that good dialog forwards the plot, reveals character, provides both surface text and subtext, uses interesting language, has a musical rhythm to it, and isn't overly expository. So you want your dialog to be doing all six of those things at once. It's a big challenge. So I encourage you to go watch the video on dialog to get a lot more information about how to pull that off.

6. Is the scene's setting clear?

What we're avoiding here is this black box syndrome, this feeling that a scene is just playing out in a black box. And we don't know where the characters are, we don't know what the setting is. Are they inside? Are they outside? We always want to be really clear about the setting of the scene. A simple way to remember this is in cinema, or think of *The Golden Girls*, or *Full House*, any old sitcom you used to watch, they always have an exterior shot before they cut to the interior where you see *The Golden Girls* sitting at the kitchen or the *Full House* people in the living room or whatever. So we normally don't need to do an exterior shot, necessarily, in literature, but you do need to establish the setting.

The reader needs to understand where exactly is the scene playing at. And then, you want to make sure you're taking advantage of that setting. If the scene is taking place in an office, how are you pulling desks or computers or neon lights into the scene versus a scene taking place in a meadow filled with flowers. Right? These are very different settings. So you want to ensure that

you're not just clear about where the scene is taking place, but also that you're taking advantage of that setting to its fullest.

7. Is the scene's character geography clear?

What we're talking here about is the blocking of the characters. Blocking is a theater and cinema term. But it's, essentially, figuring out where a character is going to stand during a scene, where on the stage or within a set are they going to move from one mark to another. In literature, we need our reader to always understand not just the where the scene is playing out like we established in question number six, but also who is in that setting and where they are located to one another. It's not enough to just say, "The scene is playing out within the Oval Office." I need to know whose behind the Resolute Desk, and who's sitting on a sofa, and who's standing near a doorway. The reader always needs to know where all the characters are in a scene.

8: Are you using all five senses in your narrative descriptions?

As authors, our fallback descriptive sense is almost always looking. Grab any scene in your manuscript, and I guarantee you you're going to have characters looking, glancing, staring, noticing. Right? We're very visually based in our descriptions. But human beings don't just experience the world through sight. We experience it through touch, through taste, through smell, through hearing. So use those sense in your scene writing. And it's probably not your first instinct to describe what your character, say, smells. Probably your first instinct is going to be this describe what they see. But sometimes smell can be a lot more evocative or a lot more interesting.

9. Does the scene emphasize the book's overall theme?

Often we write a scene without thinking of our larger ideas like our controlling idea, our message of the book, or the general theme of the thing itself. But during the revision phase, it's a perfect opportunity to look at the scene and say, "Hey, is there something I can do here? Some change I

can make? Some tweak I can implement that is going to allow this scene to better emphasize what this story is all about?"

10. Have you pushed the drama and the conflict to the max?

There's always an opportunity to amplify the drama of a scene. If you have a character stub his toe, well, why not have him break his ankle. If you have a character accidentally get in a drunk-driving accident, well, why not have him or her actually kill someone in a drunk-driving accident. You can always take these little moments of drama and blow them up. And in the drafting, you can push things pretty far. And if it gets overly dramatic or overly out of the context of the book, you can always pull things back in. But revisions is the perfect time to say, "Are things really as dramatic as they can be? If things are bad for my character, how can I make them horrible? If things are great for my character, how could I make them truly wonderful?" Push those emotions to the max.

11: What is your scene's point of view?

Is the point of view in this particular scene that you're looking at now consistent with the rest of the book? If you're writing the whole book in third person limited, why are you suddenly switching to an omniscient narrator in this one scene? That's probably a problem that needs to be fixed. Also, with point of view, you want to make sure that you've chosen the best point of view character for the particular scene that you're looking at.

Your protagonist isn't necessarily always the best point of view character to describe a scene in the most dramatic and compelling manner. So take a moment and say, "Oh, if your character is out on a dinner date, is the best point of view really from your protagonist's point of view, or is it perhaps from the waiter who is serving your protagonist and her date? Or the chef in the kitchen?" There might be a really interesting way to tell the scene from someone else's point of view.

Alright. So let's review what we've gone over here. We've got our 11 questions for revising a scene.

1. Does the scene turn? Is there a polarity shift of some kind. If it doesn't, you probably don't have a scene. You probably just have a moment of exposition.

2. Are you using good scene structure? And remember, we have another video that goes into depth about some of those scene structures.

3. How is the scene's pacing? Are things moving too quickly? Are they moving too slowly? You can address that through more telling or by more showing.

4. Is the scene's opening and closing as strong as it can be? There's a good chance you can probably do something to up the drama of the intro and the closing of your scene.

5. How is the scene's dialog? And remember, we have another video that goes way in depth about writing great dialog. So you can check that out

6. Is the scene's setting clear? Does the reader understand the environment that the scene is taking place in?

7. And then once they are clear about the environment, do they understand the character's geography to one another within that setting?

8. Are you using all five senses in your narrative descriptions?

9. Does the scene emphasize the book's overall theme? Is there an opportunity to better do so?

10. Have you pushed the drama and the conflict to its ultimate maximum?

11. And what is the scene's point of view?

And remember, like we talked about in the introduction, you don't need to apply all 11 of these questions all at once to a scene. You can pick one or two of these questions and do some sweeps of your book or just tackle things as you feel compelled to do so. I hope you guys have found this video helpful. Talk to you soon.