

# #EditorChat

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## Kelly Rigby: template for how to write a scene

When I think of what makes up a novel, I always think about those Babushka nesting dolls and how smaller dolls sit inside the largest doll of all. The physical book with the cover and back blurb is essentially a large story doll – it's what we see first – but the novel itself is told through following the stories of the smaller dolls inside. All those story dolls together are the book.

For the purpose of this article, I am going to use this analogy to look at a novel as one big story that is broken down into chapters, which tell a mini-story, and those chapters are made up of scenes, which also tell a mini story. Essentially, writing a novel is writing stories within stories and putting them all together.

In commercial fiction, story structure is used to guide the process of writing character and story change required for a novel. The most basic is the three-act structure:

- ♥ Setup
- ♥ Confrontation
- ♥ Resolution

We open with a main character (MC) who has a problem and must take conscious action to solve it against an increasingly difficult

journey through the confrontation stage until finally they reach the Resolution, where they hit an all-time low and must rise with the new skills and knowledge gained through the story, to do battle in the climax before the story resolves. In romance fiction, this resolution involves the Hero and Heroine 'battling' for their relationship and getting their HEA or a HFN.

This structure can be equally applied at chapter and scene level of the book. The scene is the building block of a story, and the best way to build a solid foundation for your novel is to write scenes that mimic the broader novel structure of setup, confrontation, resolution. This ensures those scenes deliver the same increasing dramatic tension and character change of the novel, while also allowing the reader to see the story and character changing and feel what is at stake. Stakes are what make readers care.

So how do we do this? First, let me repeat the words of Captain Jack Sparrow and say the following are more what "you'd call guidelines than actual rules." And the purpose of these guidelines is to help you create a dramatic, well-crafted scene in a voice and a style that suits your novel.

### Setup

Use the first 2 to 3 paragraphs to set up the sense of place and the character and the desire driving the scene. This will give us a starting point to feel the change coming so we can also feel the stakes. If you skip the setup and go straight to the first conflict, you miss out

on this opportunity, so start just before the conflict begins. Show me where our heroine is using bricks of detail. Imagery helps us see where we are and ground us with her in this place. Use action words so we see her move and we feel like we are there with her. Now, give me a sense of what her problem is at this moment – not overall in the story, just now. We want to focus on micro tension. How does she feel right now and what does she want to attain/do/fix? It doesn't have to necessarily be something concrete, it could be a feeling state she wants to get to, or she wants another character in the scene to agree with her about something. Just make her want something in this moment, and she needs to take action to get it.

### Example:

Our POV character for this scene is Bridget and she's at the dog park with her German Shepherd, Lux. It's a leash-free park so Lux is doing his thing and Bridget is half watching him and half preoccupied with the dismal state of her love life, and her fresh idea to fix that – join a dating app. So, in the first few paragraphs you want to give me the images I need of that park, of her and her dog, while also conveying a sense of what she's internally wrestling with – whether to rejoin a dating app even though she's never had any success on them, but she's been single for 18 months now and she's fed up. Show Bridget taking action, she's got her phone and she's downloaded the app and is filling in her details. She's not really watching her dog and so doesn't see the confrontation coming...



### Confrontation

The bulk of your scene is made up of the confrontation stage. This is where someone (or it could be something) comes into the scene and provides an obstacle to the desire/goal of your POV character. Since this opponent comes at your character with a conflicting agenda and needs, we are going to naturally create friction. Your character is going to defend themselves and their agenda and keep trying to fight off the pressure (this could be physical or just emotional). They are still going to try and get what they want but now it's harder because they have to battle the opponent or oppositional force to attain their goal. The tension and stakes need to rise as these two put pressure on each other and both try to get what they want.

#### Example:

Our confrontation is in the form of an opponent, Jake, who is at the dog park with his chihuahua, Ace, and Jake's having a very bad day because his ex-girlfriend has just been made his boss. Unfortunately, Bridget is so caught up filling out the details on the dating app and trying to find cute photos of herself and questioning her decision, that she doesn't notice Lux has started humping Jake's much smaller chihuahua. So, the obstacles begin internally and then they come from the dating app – maybe she can't find any photos that don't include her friends, which

means she'll have to take a selfie and God, she hates selfies. Now we are escalating the stakes and pressure again because Bridget has to deal with an angry Jake. She looks up and is momentarily taken aback by how damn cute the man is who goes with that voice, but before she can smile, he's accusing her of ignoring her dog owner responsibilities and causing a scene. Cute or not, he's seriously overreacting. She comes to help but resorts to being just as snippy as him while they attempt to separate the dogs. In the process of wrestling with Lux and Ace, she drops her phone and Jake accidentally stands on it, cracking the phone and freezing her screen on the dating app. As he picks it up, he sees the screen and scoffs, "those apps are full of psychos and divas". Bridget is livid; who does this guy think he is?

### Resolution

In the final few paragraphs we want to create a tipping point for the obstacles and tension. Something big happens in the conflict, something that causes emotional change and may even change the goal the character started with. This is the payoff for the action. Here we want to have the heroine take new action to resolve the dramatic tension and make it clear how she has emotionally changed and give her a new desire/goal. This is what she takes into the next scene. So what we have is a rolling wave of drama

and emotional change in the story and character journey.

#### Example:

Bridget snaps back at Jake and grabs the phone off him. He can't help himself and says something about her temper and she wants to hit him, but instead grabs her dog and stalks away, telling him to find someone else to harass. He calls after her, "Good luck with the dating. Maybe leave that beast at home!" Now, Bridget remembers why she doesn't date and as soon as she and Lux are back in the car, she restarts her phone, hoping it isn't dead. Luckily, it's not but the app seems to taunt her. She decides no way and deletes it. Time to go home and open a bottle of wine. Who says you need a man! She looks up and Jake is in the car parked beside her and he gives a little cheeky wave. She scowls at him and revs her engine and drives off. He is so infuriating, and also, annoyingly attractive.

And that is the end of our scene. We have had conflict on the page, character change and story progression, and the reader is left wondering when these two will meet again. Hook accomplished!

I hope you found my guide for how to write a scene useful. You can make changes to the structure at your convenience, but this is a handy way to assess your idea for the scene and determine if what you have on the page is what you want to say and the best way to say it.

Happy writing!

♥ [Kelly Rigby](#) is an editor and writing coach passionate about helping writers tell their stories, find their style and polish their words. Writers she's worked with have gone on to land publishing deals, win Varuna fellowships and RWA awards, and achieve success in independent publishing. She is also a senior tutor and editing consultant for The Writers Studio in Sydney.