

“Don’t Make a Scene! Build One”
Language Arts—Kaye
adapted from Lane

“Dialogue as much as anything else, reveals the character to the writer and, ultimately to the reader. I don’t have a very clear idea of who the characters are until they start talking.”
--Joan Didion

A scene is a dialogue mixed with description. Two people talking is pure dialogue, but when the author inserts thoughtshots and snapshots then we have the makings of a scene.

Very few professional authors even attempt to write more than a few lines of dialogue before inserting a snapshot or thoughtshot. Thoughtshots and snapshots draw a frame around the dialogue. Dialogue is just one aspect of a scene, and it’s a general rule to use it, not to give information, but to reveal character. When people speak they reveal themselves. What they fail to say is often as important as what they do say. Listen to this describing a long distance phonecall informing a man of his older brother’s death.

I got the telephone call telling me of his death on a Wednesday evening in July, just after I got back from the A & P. It was my Dad. He seemed to be in a good mood, and I remember we talked about the weather for a bit. Then he asked if I was sitting down, and I said, “Yeah. As a matter of fact, I’m sitting on the floor. Why?”

“That’s good, ‘cos I’ve got some bad news for you.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that, then?” I said. I thought he was joking because of the way he said it. But he didn’t answer me; he just made a sort of strangled sound in his throat. And then there was silence.

Ralph came on the line. “Hello, Roland.”

“Ralph, what’s going on? Is the old man okay? One minute he’s talking to me and the next he just walks off a leaves the phone. Is he drunk?”

“No, he’s not drunk.”

“Well, what’s happening then? He said he had some bad news to tell me. Do you know what it was?”

“Look, I’ll put Mark on, all right?”

And then Mark says, “Hello, where have you been? We’ve been trying to call you for hours. You been out on the town again?”

“No, I haven’t been out on the town again! It’s about six o’clock here, isn’t it? I’ve just done a bit of shopping. Look what the heck is going on out there? First Dad’s on the phone, then Ralph, and now you. What’s this about some bad news he was trying to tell me? Do you know?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Trevor’s dead,” and he choked a bit.

I kept the receipt from the A & P.

With a few simple brush strokes of dialogue the author illustrates a family’s inability to accept the loss of a son. For a moment, imagine how much weaker this scene would be if the author replaced the dialogue with a snapshot or thoughtshot. “My family called me on the phone but none of them would tell me what was wrong...” A line or two of dialogue in the right place can do more than a thousand pages of description.

It's difficult to write the way people speak, and it's not always necessary to include it in a story. It's also very easy to cut dialogue and replace it with either thoughtshots or snapshots. For example, let's say two characters are saying goodbye.

“Well, I guess I'll see you later.”

“OK, Bill.”

“Bye, now.”

“See you later.”

This unrevealing interchange can easily be replaced with, “Bill and Fred said goodbye.”

Most writers learn to use dialogue in small doses, using it more as a way of developing character than a means of progressing the story. If the old codger you are writing about goes to Dunkin Donuts and says to the waitress, “Pour me a cup of that Mississippi mud, would you honey,” that tells me something about him opposed to the narrator saying, “He ordered a cup of coffee.”

In any essay the same guidelines apply. Essayists choose very carefully the places where they add scenes; they need only be inserted at moments very central to the point writers try to make.

Here are a few questions to help authors decide to build a scene or cut a scene:

1. Does the dialogue tell us something about the characters?
2. Do we learn something new about the main character by what he or she thinks in reaction to something another character says?
3. Is the action of the story pushed along by the scene or does the scene slow it down? (Note: all scenes slow down stories, but powerful scenes have a reason. They reveal characters or relationships or something important about the plot.)
4. If you cut the scene out of the story does it leave a hole?