

## Value Change in a Scene

By Linda Rohrbough

I spent some time this year working with scriptwriter Eric Adams, whose latest screenplay, *My Suicide*, is in postproduction as a feature film for release next year. Our topic was creating memorable scenes. I learned from Eric a concept he calls “value change in a scene”, which I believe will help me consciously take my scenes to the next level. I want to share this concept with you.

As an aside, Eric told me that this information about value change appears in Robert McKee’s book *Story*. But I read *Story*, and I didn’t fully understand the concept until Eric explained it to me. However, if you want more information, *Story* is a place you can look.

Just so we’re tracking together, let me briefly explain the concept of a character arc. Everyone who has been writing fiction for a while knows a character (usually the main character) should go through a major change during the course of a novel. This change is called the “character arc”. Well, think of having a mini character arc in a scene and you’ll have the short explanation for creating a value change in a scene.

Here’s how it works. The goal of a scene—any scene—is to move the story forward. So the trend these days is to have the reader enter the scene at the point the character reacts to something that took place off-stage. While this sounds good, it can create a static scene. For example, let’s take a scene where we come in right after a little girl finds her dog run over by a car. We see her weeping, and at the end of the scene she vows she’ll never get another dog. That’s a static scene. It meets all the requirements for a scene, meaning it moves the story forward, but we don’t see the change, so nothing actually happens. We don’t see the dog get run over (which isn’t necessarily a bad thing). Other than the girl’s tears and her vow, there’s no movement in the scene.

However, if we can see the girl go through the emotional process of grieving her dog that leads to her vow, then we’ve got a value change. She might remember how she always wanted a dog; the day her parents gave her the puppy for her birthday; how the dog woke her up for school each morning by jumping on the bed. Now we see what the dog meant to her. Then she decides that losing the dog is too painful and she won’t let herself ever want another dog. Now there’s movement in the scene. What we’ve created is a mini character arc and that takes us someplace. The scene becomes dynamic and our story gets bumped up a notch.

Many writers make the mistake of assuming that the reader will infer what the character is feeling from a set of events. And it is true that the reader will make inferences. But he will get much more involved in the story if he is allowed to go through the process of actually making the change along with the character. This is what Eric Adams calls the value change in a scene. The character who owns the scene goes through a change in their values, and that makes the scene come alive.

It seems like a simple concept, but a value change in each scene requires additional work on the part of the writer. For one thing, the writer has to know much more about his character. It becomes necessary to get further into the character’s head, understand his background, and reveal specific aspects of his history if this short emotional journey—or mini character arc—is going to ring true. The mini character arc also elevates the importance of the character. If you have a throwaway character you’re

only using to move your story forward or reveal information to the reader, it may be necessary to rethink the scene if you don't want that character to have that much importance.

Can you get away without adding a value change to each scene? Sure. Lots of published writers do it all the time. But I want my work to move above the ordinary. And this tid-bit about value change is the sort of thing I'm looking for.

Let's face it, there's lots of competition out there. So I'm after anything I can do to give myself an edge. Writing with the goal of creating a value change in each scene helps me. I hope it will help you, too.

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