Outline of my talk, "How To Create High Impact Scenes" for OYAN Summer Workshop 2018:

We're going to start by talking about, "What is a scene?" which can feel like a question with an obvious answer … until you try to actually answer it.

A scene is: "a unit of action or a segment of a story in a play, motion picture, or television show."

Because we are people who love stories, whether it's books or movies or whatever, you probably understand instinctively what a scene is, even if you can't come up with a clear definition of what it is.

You probably already know that it's different than a chapter, though sometimes one chapter does equal one scene. I imagine that sometimes you can instinctively tell, "This is a good place to end my scene," even if you can't explain why, exactly.

My goal is to provide some guiding questions for writing good scenes so you have something to turn to when your instincts don't seem quite adequate.

When you write a long-form of fiction—novels, screenplays, and so forth—scenes are your building blocks. There is no one-size-fits-all for scenes.

Some might be 500 words and others 2,500. You might have three scenes within a chapter. You might have one in a chapter.

You'll hear writing teachers say that all scenes need a beginning, middle, and ending, or that every scene needs a hook, or that you should write in scenes and sequels.

All these different styles and suggestions can make the question, "How do I write great scenes?" really confusing.

I often write my scenes by instinct rather than planning out the structure ahead of time. If you're more of a discovery writer than an outliner, you probably find that's true for you too.

But even when I'm discovering my scene as I write it, I still make a lot of these decisions whether I'm actively trying to or not because they've

become ingrained in my process. Knowing these questions has often helped me to get the structure of a scene right the first time.

If you are the charting, outliney sort of writer, you can use this list to brainstorm scenes before you write them. Sometimes that's what I do.

But you can also use this as a checklist of sorts when you are editing, which is what I more often do. A way to kick the tires and make sure everything is as it should be.

Often the *misguided* question we asked as writers approaching a new scene is, "What is going to happen next?"

Writing a story using this question will likely give you a book that feels more like a list of things that happen than an actual, cohesive story.

Another symptom of asking this question is your characters decisions and motivations might feel "off" or mismatched from the action.

The question that I think is better is, **"Because of what happened previously, what will my character choose to do now?"**

If we want our characters to come across as thinking, feeling, logically motivated people, then this is the much better question to start our scenes with. The story's progression will feel more organic when you use the, "Because of this, now that," approach to your individual scenes.

This will also help you to have active characters instead of characters who are just letting the plot happen to them.

If you're writing a book with multiple perspectives, we may not be speaking literally about the last scene. If this point of view character knows nothing of what just happened, then we need to think from the perspective of the last scene this character was in.

There is an implied question here, of, "Whose point of view should this scene be told in?"

If you are writing a single point of view story, then this is an easy one!

Though something you'll want to be cautious about is having only the main character react and make decisions based on what's happening in the story. You'll want to consider how that action might be impacting other non-POV characters and choices they might make because of it. This goes back to the advice that everyone is the main character in their own life, and that's how you want your side characters to feel, like they view themselves as main characters.

But if you are writing a story from multiple points of view, then this is a good one to ask.

Typically, we want to write our scenes from the perspective of the character who has the most at stake. Who is the most vulnerable in this scene? Who could lose the most? Who could gain the most? These are the kinds of questions you want to ask if you are trying to figure out who gets to tell the action in this scene.

The next question I think we should ask is, "What is this character's plan or goal coming into this scene? What are they trying to make happen?"

It's possible they have a goal completely unrelated to what happens in the actual scene. Maybe their goal is to take their dog for a quick walk around the block, but then on the walk they are robbed at gunpoint.

Scenes like that are especially common in the first part of the book. But most of your scenes should have your point of view character who has something they want, and they are actively trying to obtain it.

An important nuance to creating powerful scenes is that your character's goal is wrapped up with an expectation. And it's the gap between their expectation and what really happens that creates the tension in your individual scenes.

In our dog walking example, our character expects a peaceful walk around the block like she has taken Fido on many times before. If you don't establish the expectation somehow, then your scene is likely going to fall flat in regards to tension.

But it's more typical that your character has something they are actively trying to achieve so that's what we're going to focus on. For this class we're going to look at an example from my World War II era historical, *Within These Lines*, which is coming out next year.

The scene is early in the book, and my main character, Evalina goes to the farmer's market to see her boyfriend, Taichi, who she isn't supposed to be dating because she's Caucasian and he's Japanese, and it's 1942.

So that's her goal in the scene, to see Taichi at the market. She has an expectation that he will be there. Only when she arrives, he's not there. And that leads into our next question:

"What obstacle stands in my character's way?" Or another helpful way to think of it can be, "How is my character's expectation foiled? What surprises them along the way?"

Sometimes the obstacle is obvious and undeniable, like the robber for our character who is taking a walk.

Sometimes the character spends part of the scene trying to deny that the obstacle exists. When Evalina sees that Taichi is not yet at the market, she tells herself that he could be stuck in traffic. For several pages, she tries to deny the obstacle.

The next question is: **"What decision does my character make as a result?"**

This is one of my favorite writing discoveries in the last year, that in most of my trouble scenes, the ones that weren't working, but I couldn't really figure out why, this is what was off. My character was not making a decision.

So if you have a scene that isn't working, looking at the decisions their making is a great place to start.

Your character can decide to act, or they can decide to not act, but them making a decision is critical to your scene working.

Going back to my example from *Within These Lines*, Evalina could have chosen to not act in several ways. She could have just gone home.

Likewise, there were many options for how she could act. She could have complained to a friend. She could have decided that she would ask Taichi about it the next time they saw each other.

But because Evalina is a bold sort, and because she is very afraid for Taichi, I felt she needed to make a big, showy decision. I decided that she would get on a ferry and go to his house. Not only does it fit her, which is important, but it feels interesting. Which is rather critical in writing a compelling story.

While there are no official rules for what kind of decision your character should make, having them make an interesting decision will go a long way toward crafting an interesting scene. The decision should still be logical, and it should make sense for who the character is and the circumstances around them, but it needs to be interesting.

If you are looking for ways to surprise readers or add plot twists, try examining the way your characters expectations are foiled and the resulting decisions that they make. If your character is making logical but surprising decisions, and they are having logical but surprising outcomes, then your reader will be surprised … but not in a way that makes them doubt the plausibility.

Sometimes we don't explore the outcome until the following scene, so it might be that you close your scene by showing the decision they make.

That's what I did in *Within These Lines*. Evalina has asked a mutual friend if she knows where Taichi's family is, and that's where we pick up:

> Mrs. Ling holds out a beautiful navel orange, round and bold. "Share this with your friend. May it bring you both good luck."
> The market doesn't officially open for a few more minutes, but San Franciscans already mill about the rows of tables, haggling over prices of the first spring vegetables. The men who stole the Hamasakis' spot chat with customers, and the sight makes my chest burn.
> I put the orange in my basket and pedal along the street. The fog has thinned, but my thoughts are hazy with anger.

At the ferry ticket booth, I pull coins from my handbag and place them on the counter. "When does the boat leave for Alameda?"

I decided to cut the scene off there. I've always been a big fan of the advice to arrive late and leave early in scenes. You want to start your scenes as close to the action as possible, and you want to cut it off at a moment that will make the reader ask, "But what happens?"

You might notice that I didn't do something like, "I pedaled along the street as a new plan formed in my mind," with a cliffhanger type ending to my scene. Those have their place, but they can start to feel like cheap tricks to your readers. Here I chose to show enough of Evalina's decision to incite curiosity.

Next we need to ask, "What is the outcome of my character's decision?" (And am I going to show it now or next?)

Again, I chose to officially cut the scene where I did, but often times you'll include the outcome within the scene, or at least hint at it.

For this particular decision, the outcome is that she gets on a boat and shows up in Alameda without any warning to Taichi.

Sometimes your outcome is going to be another action type scene. So going back to our dogwalker, if our character is robbed at gunpoint, and she decides to chase after the robber, we are going to move our readers right into another place of action.

If she decides to not fight back, and instead freezes with fright there on the sidewalk, then we instead move to a place of reaction while the character processes what happened to them.

We don't want our stories to be action, action, action. Even if your genre is thriller or adventure, you still need to build in moments where your character has time to react to what is happening around them.

You may have heard this taught, as I have, as writing in "Scenes and Sequels," with scenes being the action part and sequels being the slow-down-and-react part. I've always found this teaching very confusing.

What does work for my brain is that when I get to this question of, "What's the outcome of the decision?" I also try to figure out, "Does my character need time to process what has just happened?"

Usually, the amount of processing time corresponds with how big the obstacle or decision was.

Going back to my example from *Within These Lines*, Evalina made a gutsy decision by deciding to go uninvited to Taichi's hometown. Neither of their families know about the true nature of their relationship. Evalina has never been to his home, nor has she ever called him, for fear that they would be found out.

This is a very big decision that she made, and I chose for some of her processing to happen offstage. It's implied in the opening of her next scene that she spent the ferry ride over thinking through what to do now.

I could have chosen to show that, but **one thing about these kinds of reaction/processing scenes is that a little goes a long way.** Hanging out with Evalina while she's sitting on a ferry and contemplating the possible ripple affects her decision might have can get boring fast, so I chose to show none of it.

In Donald Maass's *Writing The Breakout Novel*, he rails against "In the kitchen drinking tea" scenes, which is what these kinds of processing moments can too often turn into.

He says:

> "They are a pause, a marking of time, if not a waste of time. They do not do anything. They do not take us anywhere. They do not raise questions or make us tense or worried. No wonder they do not hold my attention."

We don't always have to literally have our characters "sit around and drink tea," for it to be the kind of stale scene Maass is talking about here. To me it felt like having her on the ferry would be really boring, so instead I have her on the phone with a friend to show some of the outcomes of her decision.

For clarity's sake. This isn't the next scene in the book. We've just finished a scene from Taichi's perspective, so the reader knows that Evalina is in Alameda and has called Taichi's house for him to come pick her up.

But this is how Evalina's next scene begins:

> "Evalina, you have flipped your wig." But Gia sounds admiring, not admonishing. "I knew when you finally fell for a boy, you would fall hard, but you seriously took a ferry to Alameda?"
>
> "What else was I supposed to do? He wasn't at the market this morning, plus these articles in the paper …" I swallow. "I thought maybe his family had been taken."
>
> "You are so dramatic sometimes. They're not going to be taken. It's all voluntary."
>
> "I don't think so, Gia." I twist the cord of the pay phone around my finger. "I think they'll all be made to go."
>
> "I still can't believe you took a ferry to Alameda. What are you going to tell your parents?"
>
> "Hopefully they'll never know. You'll cover for me if they call or stop by, right?"

In this moment, readers are able to see what kind of outcome Evalina's decision has had, and we get a bit of her reaction as well. Even though there's movement in the season—Evalina is on the phone, as opposed to just sitting and thinking—it still feels like a beat of rest for the audience before the action kicks back up.

There is a great example of this in the movie *Tangled*. After Rapunzel has sung with the thugs that she has a dream, and the palace guards have come for Flynn, Rapunzel and Flynn escape into the tunnel underneath the Snuggly Duckling. The writers could have chosen for them to just run the whole time, but instead they give the audience about a minute by having Flynn and Rapunzel process what just happened.

This slowing down from the action gives us a moment to breathe, and it gives them a moment to bond. To process what happened and to learn a bit more about the other.

These pausing scenes are frequently where the deepening of relationships happens in stories. Like where Evalina calls her best friend and chooses to trust her. Or in Tangled where we see that Flynn's respect for Rapunzel has grown. This can also a great chance to show readers or the audience what your character is motivated by and what's important to them.

Sometimes your entire scene will be a reaction, particularly in heist novels or movies. A heist will go awry, and then we'll have a scene where the whole crew is sitting in a room debating the various choices and consequences.

This can also happen frequently in quest novels. Something bad happens and now everyone has to gather together to figure out where they're going to go from here.

So you've given your character a moment—whether it's a paragraph or pages—to process what has happened, survey all their choices and various consequences. Now what?

Now we ask, What decision is born out of the reaction time? Or if there wasn't reaction time, just the outcome of last decision, then we loop immediately back to the beginning and ask, "Because of what just happened, what will my character decide to do now?"

Here is a compiled list of all the questions:

- **Because of what happened in the previous scene, what will my character choose to do now?**
- **What is this character's plan or goal coming into this scene?**
- **What obstacle stands in my character's way? How is their expectation of what will happen foiled?**
- **What decision does my character make as a result?**
- **What is the outcome of my character's decision?**
- **Does my character need time to process and react to what has happened?**
- **If so, what is the decision born out of his processing time?**

What's really fun is that once you understand this natural pattern, then you are able to mix and match how you put together your scenes.

Scene one could be your character setting out to achieve a goal, and then that expectation being foiled.

Scene two could show the new decision they make, and the outcome or resulting action.

Scene three could be processing, making a new decision, and pursuing a new scene goal.

See how it's all happening in the same basic order, just being split in different ways?

Arranging the structure of your scenes is like arranging your individual sentences. If you use the exact same sentence structure every time, your prose becomes very predictable and boring.

Beautiful writing comes from sentences being arranged in all different kinds of ways, and the same is true for building your scenes. If every scene begins with the character having a plan, the plan getting spoiled, and them making a resulting decision, your story will quickly take on a mechanical feel. So it's good to change up where you break and start your scenes.

While we tend to think of scenes building in a constant upward motion, what it actually should feel like a series of stress and stress-release sequences. Instead, I think of plot always moving us up in tension and toward the story climax, but not the continuous foot down on the gas pedal.

I read something really interesting about composing a story and being mindful of your readers stress in *Million Dollar Outlines* by David Farland:

"All stories must create a balance of stress. If I do not create enough stress in my story, the story will bore the reader. If I create too much stress, the story will become unbearable and the reader will put it down. My job is to create a pleasing level of stress that rises toward a dramatic climax, then resolves."

So, yes, you want to be building tension as you write, but you also want to be giving readers those pauses, and ultimately a payoff and the end where they can relax.

Let's shift from looking at the broad picture of scene structure to a couple of nuts and bolts type of things that I think can sometimes be easier to look at in editorial, and then I'll open it up for questions.

What do I find interesting about this scene?

You can certainly ask this before you write a scene, but if you haven't yet, I think it's a helpful one to answer in edits.

This is one I had never thought about until I was reading Rachel Aaron's book 2k to 10k, in which she talked about how she realized that the scenes she wrote the fastest were what she called "candy bar scenes." Meaning scenes that she had been excited about from the beginning of the story, that she'd been looking forward to. So as she worked to increase both her speed and enjoyment of writing, she realized that if *she* was bored by a scene, why would she think her readers wouldn't be?

Here's how she put it:

"If I had scenes that were so boring I didn't want to read them, then there was no way anyone would want to read them. This was my novel, after all. If I didn't love it, no one would."

So as you're crafting your scenes, or at the very least after the fact, consider asking what you find interesting about the scene. And as Rachel suggests, if there's nothing there that excites you, then add something.

What is the opening hook or question?

With every scene, you're inviting the reader deeper into your storyworld. We talked earlier about arriving late and leaving early, and let's get into what that actually looks like. We'll focus on opening hooks first, and then get to closings in just a bit.

Opening hooks really just look like you're raising a question. Let's look at a few from *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*

- I grasp my skirt to provide my knees freedom to run. "Lydia!" I'm yelling even though I know she can't hear, that she's not with us.

- "I beg you to reconsider this." Lydia's words are spoken through pinched lips.

- "What's this for?"

Each one of these is something raises a question, sometimes literally, rather than answering it. That's what you want to do in the opening of your scene.

But you don't want your reader to be utterly confused:

Have I provided context for my readers in the first 100ish words?

100 words is just a guideline, but you don't want your reader to feel like they're stumbling around trying to find their footing for too long. Here is the first 121 words of one of the scenes referenced above:

> "I beg you to reconsider this." Lydia's words are spoken through pinched lips. Her gaze trails after the Hart Schaffner & Marx employee as he ducks into the back room. "Really, Piper. Buying a shirt for a man is far too bold a gesture. How could Walter not read into such a gift?"
>
> "It's my fault his shirt was ruined. I'm trying to be fair, not flirtatious."
>
> Lydia yawns. "And why would you have thrown a mud ball at him in the first place? You're not a child anymore, Piper."
>
> I shrug and feign interest in the display of neckties, running the cool silk between my fingers. The store smells of cedar and mint and is oppressively quiet, like a library.

We start with our hook of Lydia's disapproval, and then I quickly provide details about where they are and what's around them. Within 120 words we know who is there, where we are, why they're there. I keep building on it as the scene goes on, of course, but we need at least a flash of context before their conversation can go on.

What is the closing hook or invitation to turn the page?

A closing hook has several jobs. The biggest job is to get the reader to read the next scene. As we talked about earlier, you don't want to do all

cliffhangers or you'll exhaust your poor readers, but you do often want to end with at least a sense of mystery. Here are a few from Lost Girl:

- A scream rips through the bright blue afternoon—my own.

- Nor can I talk myself out of the fear that Dr. LeVine prioritizes secrecy more than Lydia's healing.

- Oh, Lydia. What will become of you?

One thing I try to achieve is leaving the reader with a certain emotion. Like the one where Piper realizes she's screaming. I wanted to create a sense of fear, a sense of danger. I chose the detail of the bright blue afternoon because I wanted to show that this is unexpected to her, same with including the detail that she realizes *she* is screaming.

The second closing hook is about Piper's mounting suspicions, and my intention was to leave the reader with a sense of, "Huh. There's more going on with that family than they want others to know. Wonder what's going to happen with that."

Switching up the emotional beats with which you end your scenes is a very good thing to do.

One last tip about writing scenes is that:

Storytelling is different than writing.

If you're trying to both come up with what happens AND write it at the same time, that can really be difficult for your brain because you're trying to multitask.

Something I started doing after reading 2k to 10k (obviously that was .99 spent very well) was writing out a short description of my scenes and what would happen before I tried to craft them. Here's how Rachel puts it:

"Here I was, desperate for time, floundering in a scene, and yet I was doing the hardest work of writing (figuring out what needs to happen to move the story forward in the most dramatic and exciting fashion) in the most time consuming way possible (i.e. in the middle of writing itself)."

"If you want to write faster, the first step is to know what you're writing before you write it … Every writing session after this realization, I dedicated

five minutes and wrote out a quick description of what I was going to write that day."

I found that worked really well for me. I didn't really understand why, though, until I read K. M. Weiland's thoughts on how coming up with a story and writing a story are two different things. Here's how she says it:

"Writing is, well, writing. It's the art of putting words on the page in a pleasing way that accurately, efficiently, and sometimes artfully conveys information.

Storytelling happens across media … Storytelling is the skill of finding the universal truths of human experience and translating them into cohesive drama."