Scene Structure Checklist

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Definition of a scene: "Scenes are capsules in which compelling characters undertake significant actions in a vivid and memorable way that allows the events to feel as though they are happening in real time." (Jordan Rosenfeld, *Make a Scene*). Let's break this down:

- *Capsule*: The word *capsule* implies a limited, compressed period of time. Scenes start in one moment, in present action and move forward in real time, then end—without breaking up the scene into other times, places, or POVs.

- *Compelling characters undertaking significant actions*: Scenes need to feature compelling characters, all of whom must have significant impact on the protagonist, acting as either an ally (reflection character), a romance interest, or an antagonist. All should have core needs and goals that either help or hinder the protagonist from reaching her goal. And the protagonist's actions in a scene must also be important in relation to her goal.

- *Vivid and memorable*: Use as much sensory detail in a scene to bring it to life without bogging down with too much unnecessary description. And what makes a scene memorable is giving it a high moment—which reveals something essential about the characters and/or plot.

- *Happening in real time*: Backstory, long flashbacks, and excessive narration stop the present action and interrupt the pacing and flow of the scene. Author intrusion is jarring and unwelcome. Just show, don't tell, events happening as they happen. Briefly summarize what isn't important enough to show but needs to be conveyed.

Checklist (the more you can check off per scene, the better!):

____ My scene has a strong opening line (hook) that grabs the reader

____ My scene has a beginning, middle, high point, and end (hanging or resolved)

____ My scene is important to the plot (and I can explain exactly why it is)

____ My scene helps reveal something new about the characters or plot

____ My scene starts in the middle of action in present time and moves forward

____ My scene gives a brief nod to setting through the character's POV

____ My scene stays in one POV the whole time and makes clear who the POV character is right away (preferably in the first two lines)

____ My scene has dialog that has been compressed and distilled, which provides bits of important info or backstory as well as reveals character

____ My scene has brief bits of narrative, but not more than a few lines in one place before it switches to either internal thinking or dialog

____ My scene is full of sensory detail: smells, sound, textures, weather, etc.

____ My scene clearly indicates how much time has passed since the last scene with these characters as well as the previous scene in my novel (if different)

____ My scene evokes a rich setting to which my POV character reacts and responds

____ My scene's high moment advances the plot in an important way

____ My scene begins in a different kind of way than the scene before (usually)

____ My scene has some element of surprise, twist, or interesting motif that makes it meaningful and helps bring across the themes of the novel

____ My scene is full of inner and/or outer conflict to some degree that complicates the plot and makes it hard for my main character to reach her goal (outer motivation in the story)

____ My scene has no dull parts; I've taken them all out! I've resisted the urge to explain!

____ My scene has no extra words or clunky writing; I've gone through and cut as much as I could so that less is more and every word is just right and needed

____ My scene "moves the camera around" so that the high moment stands out and the reader is made to pay attention

____ My scene takes the reader where I want her to go and makes her notice what I want her to notice

____ My scene is infused with microtension, adding mystery by hinting at trouble, inner conflict, and secrets

____ My scene ends with a bang—with either some insight for the POV character, something important happening, or some surprise that leaves the reader "satisfied"

____ My scene does not tease, leave the reader confused, hint vaguely at things, or overwhelm the reader with too much information or trivial stuff