



Writing Bingeable Chapters: Vetting Your Scenes

“All that is required from a person who takes a pen in hand is to line up the various keyholes scattered about his soul so that a ray of sunlight can shine through onto the paper set out in front of him.”

– Victor Pelevin in *Buddha’s Little Finger*

Recommended Courses: [Unlock Your Novel](#), [Writing Bingeable Characters](#)

Read / Study: [Here’s my blog post on writing a bingeable chapter.](#)

Vetting Your Scene

1. Identify character’s object (micro desire for THIS scene) going into the scene (don’t worry about the macro Desperate Desire for the whole book right now). What do they want in THIS scene alone...ideally, you will see the micro desires match up and build toward your character getting their macro desire.
2. Are they aware of possible obstacles? List them.
3. What is their Misbelief going into the scene? (could be their usual Misbelief that runs them, or something specific to this context)

4. Has anything happened just before the scene that will add to their mental state? Even if it happened “offstage,” it’s important to know this! This will clue us in to what energy they’re bringing into the scene with them.
5. What are the actual obstacles in the scene? Were they the ones your proto was predicting up in #2? Were there surprise obstacles?
6. What are ways your character typically deals with these sorts of obstacles?
7. How will these particular obstacles challenge them?
8. What obstacles will they overcome in this scene?
9. Which ones will carry over into future scenes?
10. What will need to happen in order for your proto to overcome the obstacles in the book overall? If there is a quality they need to grow into, a fear to overcome, or something else – is this scene preparing them for the moment down the line when they step into their personal power in the climax?
11. Have you embedded character growth in the scene—meaning, are they moving through their arc – growing, being challenged, experiencing setbacks, etc. - or just treading water?

Obstacles should incite character growth, moving them to and away from their Desperate Desire.

Setbacks set up the climax and increase suspense and tension, but overall, you're moving forward toward the change. Sometimes I think of character arc as the "transformation arc" - how are they different at the end of the book than they were at the beginning?)

Remember: The plot is a series of events that happen in the story. We arrange these events so that they are all doing the job of challenging your protagonist so that they can go through their full transformation arc. By the end of the book, your proto needs to have healed their Misbelief, unlocked their Longing, and identified their Purpose, whether or not they get their Desperate Desire they had at the beginning.

Obstacles

:: Conflict is at the root of all drama ::

- Inner conflict (uncertainty, fear, etc.)
- Backstory (bad childhood, etc)
- Outer conflict (What is against your character? Poverty, race, society, mental illness etc)
- Antagonist (Who is against your character – and are they REALLY against her?)

Obstacles can range from a red light when you need to go fast to an abusive husband to a lack of talent when you want to be a famous violinist.

- Your character will have many obstacles. More obstacles, more drama. More drama, more tension and higher stakes.

Searching for Obstacles:

- Obstacles need to be authentic, not imposed upon the character, but coming from their inner lives and outer given circumstances (their backstory, the state of things when the story begins)
- Obstacles go from micro (inner or small) to macro (society at large)
- Compounding obstacles = plot (red light, late for job interview + rude doorman won't send you upstairs for interview + upset when you leave and not paying attention, so hit by a car....etc.)
- Compounding obstacles add tension and drama – this creates profluence = the reader keeps reading because they want to see how this will play out
- Subvert reader expectations (see below) and avoid clichés
- What does your character love most in the world? Now, take it away from them.
- What do they want most in the world? Now, make it damn near impossible to get.
- What is your character's misbelief? The story she tells herself that isn't true, but runs her? ("I'm not loveable.")
- How does your character's misbelief create obstacles for her?

Assignment: Obstacles for Your Book – List all the obstacles in your book.

Stakes

Every story needs stakes. It's what makes a story go (desire drives, but stakes is basically the gasoline of the vehicle). A character wants something, but maybe they can't have it, but if they don't have it, bad things will happen, so they must get it somehow, come hell or high water. Desire and stakes go hand in hand. The stakes are in direct proportion to how close or far away a character is to getting what they want. They further away, the higher the stakes. Too far away and it's boring. You have to find that sweet spot, that edge. They must have HOPE or then you're writing a character with depression, which is damn hard. But it can't ever be easy or clear. What they want should sometimes be so close they can taste it – only to watch it slip through their fingers.

[What are the stakes in this book for your protagonist?](#) Because before we can go any deeper into how to craft a great chapter – and the next one, and the next one – we need to get clear on what stakes are and how they function in the novel.

[List your stakes. That's an assignment you can work on as you prep for your revision.](#) What is at stake at the beginning of the book through the end?

You can have macro and micro stakes, with micro stakes in each chapter building to the macro of the larger plot arc.

[So maybe one way to begin wrapping your head around revising is to think about it in chapter chunks. Looking at the function, the role, each chapter plays in BOTH plot and character arc.](#) Character is the heart of it all, and I'm saving that for a bit later in this letter, just to give you some story context first.

[Each chapter: What does she want \(objective\)? What's at stake? What happens if she doesn't get it? Etc.](#)

Vetting Your Stakes

Write the objective from the beginning of your scene at the top of a piece of paper. Write a list beneath it of what is at stake if the character gets (or doesn't get) their objective.

Once you hit on one that seems to work, then begin to vet the objective.

- Is the stake high enough? Do we care if the proto gets or does not get what they want?
- Does it give them an opportunity to pivot or strategize?
- Are you escalating? (See Saunders below)

- How does what's at stake show something about your character?

Be wary of chapters that are treading water – familiar story territory. [It's really helpful to think here about escalation](#) – once you introduce a problem that a character has, you need to escalate that problem. It has to show up in new and varied ways so that it doesn't feel like we're reading the same scene. (George Saunders talks about this really well in his craft book *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*).

Resources

[Marginalian excerpt \(George Saunders\)](#)

