

For older students

Reading Like a Writer: Learning from the Masters

Critical essays were a significant component of the work I did in graduate school as I worked toward an MFA in writing for children and young adults. This involved dissecting works of children's literature to understand the techniques of craft used by an author to make their book succeed (or not). Upon graduating in July of 2009 I started the StorySleuths blog (www.storysleuths.com) where I and several fellow writers focus on a different novel each month. We investigate the novel, searching for clues about how to improve our own writing.

I enjoy bringing this kind of analysis to the classroom, working with students in upper-middle or high school to teach them how to explore children's literature for clues about how to improve their own writing. I work with the classroom teacher to select the reading and topics for that semester, then each classroom session involves both discussion and writing as we identify techniques being used, and apply them.

Sample Lesson Plan:

Exploring the use of scene versus summary by examining the short story *The King of Pelinense*. Assumption made is that students have already read the story.

Learning Goal:

From the short story collection **Geektastic** we will focus on M.T. Anderson's *The King of Pelinense* to look at how Anderson uses **scenes** to show action and emotion happening in the now, and **summary** to describe (tell) occurrences that transpired over a longer period of time.

Discussion:

Writer Jordan Rosenfeld said, "scenes are moments of action, shown to the reader, not told. Each scene has a purpose (the Goal), conflict (Obstacles) and an ending (the Disaster)."

While closely reading M.T. Anderson's story "The King of Pelinense" in **Geektastic** we look at discrete chunks of story to determine whether they meet the definition of a scene as described by Rosenfeld. Was each a moment of action shown, not told to the reader? Was there a clearly discernable purpose? A conflict? An ending?

It becomes clear that a story is more than just a string of scenes. In between those moments taking place in the now we see that Anderson intersperses bits of summary, telling rather than showing. These summaries are an opportunity for the writer to take a breath and either reflect on events that have led to the current moment, or set up what is about to come.

In her book **Imaginative Writing: Elements of Craft** author Janet Burroway talks about the difference between scene and summary and the roles each play in a story. She defines these two elements thus; "A

summary covers a relatively long period of time in a relatively short compass; a scene deals at length with a relatively short period of time.” (p. 276)

Scene is in the moment, it is now. It is the actual unfolding of events. Summary, on the other hand, is just that, a summation of what has led to or resulted from a specific moment.

Burroway explains that summary is often necessary, and is useful, but is not essential. Scene, on the other hand, is essential, because it is scene where users have the opportunity to experience the story as it is happening to the character. She points out that an error beginning writers make is to rely too heavily on summary, denying the reader the opportunity to experience significant moments through the characters’ senses.

Anderson uses scene far more than summary. Even when flashing back, a typical use for summary, he gives just the briefest summary to set the scene, then drops the character into the moment, allowing the reader to be there with him.

Here, on page 118, Anderson uses summary to set up a bit of backstory about how the main character came to be in Boothbay Harbor:

“I had looked up the address on a map, and I had drawn a little version of it on a piece of school paper. It didn’t look like it was far. I walked out of the town center, and along a road that led past ridges of some kind of needly tree, like pines or firs or spruce. I don’t know the difference between them. A couple of years ago I tried to find out the difference from a book, but all the pictures looked exactly the same.”

Consider the differences between this and a piece of a scene:

“I pointed my foot at a wicker chair, and asked if I could please sit down.

He said, ‘Kid, I’ve got Caelwin tied to a pillar, with a pterodactyl shrieking and coming to feast its unholy beak upon his numbles.’

I went over to the wicker chair anyway and sat. I stared at the floor. I felt very weak.” (p. 120)

The scene is here and now, we are with him watching things unfold through his eyes and experiencing his emotions. It is showing. The summary covers a greater passing of time—it is telling.

Characters grow and change through the action that takes place in scenes. Summary, on the other hand, is used as a stepping stone between scenes, a mechanism to bring the character to the time and place when those changes will occur, with the reader fully present.

Putting Words into Action:

Write a two part scene that includes both summary and a more active scene using any of the following prompts:

Recreate a scene from your own experience

-or-

Write a fictional scene of your own choosing

-or-

Use a visual cue (provided by instructor)

-or-

Use this scenario--A character has just had an argument with his/her mom. Write a scene in which you use summary to briefly describe the argument, then put us on scene at some location in the character's house where he/she performs some action as a result of the emotions he/she is feeling as a result of that argument.