

## Scene vs Summary

Telling a story requires a balance between summary and scene. Summary moves us forward quickly, providing background information about characters and events or condensing years into a single paragraph. A scene forces us to linger, to slow down and experience a moment in real time alongside the characters. We often need both in a story, but too much of one or the other will create an imbalance: we'll zip along without becoming invested in the story or we'll spend too much time in moments that offer nothing to the story.

**Scene:** takes place in real-time, like a movie, usually contains dialogue between characters, and should be used for important interactions and events.

**Example:** "She was quiet as he drove her home. He parked by the curb in front of the yellow house with its overgrown lawn. She reached into her purse and pulled out a white envelope and handed it to him.

"Read it later," she said.

The car door squeaked as she got out."

**Summary:** moves quickly, giving the reader important highlights or reminders, and is used for background information. Bits of summary often occur within scenes.

**Example:** "He remembered the letter she'd written him last summer. She'd given it to him on their last date after he'd driven her home. She'd said she never wanted to see him again. He still had the letter tucked under his shirts in a drawer."

Scenes slow us down and allow us to experience the moment with the characters. They help us become emotionally invested in the story and the character's struggle. Summary speeds us through time and gives us a sense of events happening outside the scope of the story. Most stories blend the two, sometimes within the same section. In the following paragraph, Joyce Carol Oats blends the two. In this paragraph, *sometimes* signals that we're dealing with summary. The transition to *one night* situates us into a specific moment in time, pushing us into scene:

**Example:** "**Sometimes** they did go shopping or to a movie, but sometimes they went across the highway, ducking fast across the busy road, to a drive-in restaurant where older kids hung out. The restaurant was shaped like a big bottle, though squatter than a real bottle, and on its cap was a revolving figure of a grinning boy holding a hamburger aloft. **One night** in midsummer they ran across, breathless with daring, and right away someone leaned out a car window and invited them over, but it was just a boy from high school they didn't like. It made them feel good to be able to ignore him. . . ."

--Joyce Carol Oats "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"