

Go Around The Room - Add Emotion When You Can! ... from *Your Screenplay Sucks.com!*

Don't ever forget, you're in the Emotion Pictures business. So, when writing a scene, ask, "How are these people *feeling*?" *All* these people. What is each one feeling *all the way through the scene*?

At the top... what was she doing *before* she walked into this elegant bar? What had happened at the office and how did it make her feel? How is she showing us what she's feeling? In the middle of the scene, stuff is happening. How is it affecting her? Is it changing her (or his) mood? Then, at the end, how does she feel NOW? Where will she go next? Infused with this new feeling / mood that the scene fostered in her, what might she do?

If one of your characters, a big-time movie star, is at a fancy hotel eating lunch on the outdoor terrace, you need to go around the room and get reactions from people noticing him. That would happen in real life. If no one pays attention to him, how do we know he's famous?

Writers tend to concentrate on the characters who are talking. Don't.

"Go around the room" means checking in with every character. Pay attention! You can teach us about characters who are... gosh... only... *listening*. At various points during the scene, take everyone's pulse. Not just the principals. Do not ceaselessly tell us about every character all the time, but if someone's doing or feeling something useful, communicate it.

This is not only true while writing, but in preproduction while planning coverage, and on set, when shooting. Just like in real life, every person in a room is a living, breathing entity, each hoping, worrying, hesitating, scheming, wanting something. They may not be the main player, but they are certainly present and *feeling*. A sensitive writer will have their antennae out, constantly aware of the nuances of emotion in everyone present, whether they are obviously participating in the goings-on or not. Be that writer.

Olivia de Havilland was the finest conversationalist I ever knew. One time I told her, "You make me feel like I'm the most important person in the world." She smiled and said, "Aren't you?"

Every character in your scene feels that way, whether you tell us what they're feeling or not. From time to time, though, it will be an excellent idea to let us know.

It will be interesting to see what fresh, strong, wonderful moments you find.

A superb reason to add reaction shots to your script is, when you make the movie, they will help your editor. Often, laughs happen on reaction shots, not on the person speaking. If you don't have the material, your editor can't get the laugh. For all kinds of reasons, your editor will want to cut away from the primary players in a conversation.

When your editor asks, "After Bunk spills his milkshake, have you got a single of Matilda?", she *needs* that footage. If you don't have it, she'll shrug, think you're an idiot, and keep working. Reaction shots start with the screenplay. If you don't go around the room while you're writing, when you get to the editing room, you won't have reaction shots.

I can't overstress the need for reaction shots. Lightly sprinkle them in your script. They deepen the read and will give your editor the coverage she'll need to save your ass.

But! If the character is not even IN the room, you can't ever cut to them and you are screwed.

Ask yourself during every step of the outlining and writing and rewriting and rewriting and rewriting and rewriting and rewriting and *rewriting* and rewriting process...

...Who Else *Might* Be There?

My outlines, and perhaps yours, have a tendency to be thin. When doing an outline, beat sheet, brainstorming pages, etc., we often think about only the most important players... because their conflict / problem / situation is the reason the scene exists. If you get those story points right, but don't look around for other participants, you're in danger of leaving riches on the editing room floor.

If you don't ask yourself, "Is there anybody in this story who could be participating in this scene, but isn't?", you will leave out interesting story and emotion and character development.

If you're writing a scene where your heroine goes to a cocktail party, talks to a doctor and discovers that, at the same time her wife had breast augmentation surgery, she also secretly chose to have her tubes tied, you'll include your heroine and the doctor (duhh). Give the doctor's wife a line of dialogue. The party host, who tells something to an offscreen caterer. Background characters around the pool. Enough people to get the basic information across.

However, when you examine the scene and ask, "who *else* might be there?", opportunities for drama, emotion, humor, and conflict go up. The more people you can add (who won't clog the machinery), the more the scene can accomplish. Remember, they don't have to have dialogue. They may only react... but they can't react if they're not invited to the party.

Check your list of EVERY character, be they large or small. You never know where inspiration (happy lightning!) will strike. Who might be there? Her boss? Her best friend? Her assistant from work? Or, oh my my, is her wife there? *That* would change things! Imagine the new possibilities!

Say your lead character is in her crummy apartment, next to broke, depressed because she just had to sell her beloved convertible, and she and her trumpet-playing daughter are baking brownies. Some of her men-in-divorce neighbors are there, commiserating with the 11 year old about her horrible Band Director at school... and the daughter plays the piece from the recital her mother missed... That's nice.

But, if you look at your list of characters and remember that one guy's a trumpet player... happy lightning might strike you, as it did me.

I changed it so the daughter starts to play the recital piece and her mother picks up her trumpet and joins in. Mom is pretty good, daughter is better. Then, the man picks up a trumpet and joins in. He's fantastic. He and the daughter dig into the jazz aspect of the piece and mom drops out. 11 year old girl and extremely talented 40 year old man play trumpet together. At the end, he compliments her, which her teacher has never done.

When I wrote the shorthand description of that change, nine words on my outline, I instantly felt the scene and cried. Any scene that affects a writer that strongly will have the same effect on an audience. All because I had a list of characters and stuck an extra one in.

A character list gives you names of people can jump into that scene who never would've been there otherwise. Obviously, not every scene has every single character in it, (again, duuh) but any scene can perhaps have more people than you originally intended. It might really help.

The only way to find out is ask.