

How to Write a Novel

LESSON 14



The Writer's Guide to Transition Scenes: Shooting "But..."

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Transitions Drive Writers Nuts

You have this hole in your story after your hero does X and before he gets to Y, and a few hours, or days, or weeks, or months, where you want to put something to let the reader know that:

- Time has passed
- The location has changed
- The situation has changed
- The characters have changed

And the temptation is to take the reader step by step through how they get from X to Y, no matter how tedious this process might be.

And having once read a chapter in a commercially published novel with two characters stuck in the mud where absolutely nothing happened but that time passed while they were stuck in the mud, I can attest that even good professional writers can fall into transition Hell.

But transitions don't need to drive you nuts.

You absolutely never have to write the boring parts, take readers step by step through anything, explain how characters get from Point A to Point B, or any of the rest of the things you're sure your readers need.

So this week, you learn how to get your cart out of the mud, and your story out of Dullsville.

Onward.

Why Transitions Matter

You want your novel to hold together — for readers to travel effortlessly from the beginning through the middle to the end of your story without ever thinking, “I could be doing something so much [cooler / more fun / more exciting / less painful] than this.”

And having stopped reading that one novel I mentioned at the “stuck in the mud” scene, and never picking it back up after I bailed, I can attest that one bad transition can cost you that reader’s happiness with your book. Make this same mistake in two books, and you can lose the reader for good.

And it is ALWAYS easier to sell more books to a reader who already likes your books than it is to find a new reader.

So RULE ONE of writing transitions is this:

- Never hand a reader an excuse to quit reading your work

What this means is that any time you catch your brain thinking, “God, this is dull, but...”

STOP.

Stop writing that very instant, and look at what you’re writing. Ask yourself, “What do I hope to accomplish with this scene?”

And then ask yourself either, “Is that important to the story?” or if you know it’s important to the story, then, “How can I do this better?”

**Because one bad transition can cost you a reader.
And readers are harder to get than they are to keep.**

So, Having Instilled Some Necessary Paranoia...

Here's **RULE TWO** of writing transitions:

- A good transition leaves your reader with a question for which that reader wants (or better, *needs*) to discover an answer.

When you have planted that question in your reader's mind, you have written your transition.

I'm going to repeat that, because I know this isn't how you thought transitions worked. I know this because it wasn't how I thought transitions worked either.

***When you have planted
your transition question
in your reader's mind,
you have written your transition.***

So I'm going to walk you through the eight weeks of transitions I've written already in the demo novel for this class.

I'm going to show you the section of the scene that contains the transition, and you're going to find the transition, and then write the transition on section one of this week's worksheet in the form of a question.

If you haven't been reading along on my demo novel for this class, it's time to catch up, to see my raw, typo-rich first draft and read the story so you'll be able to understand what matters in this story and what might look important but isn't.

I've done a lot of transitions in *Dead Man's Party* already. I'm eight weeks into the novel (have not yet written this week's installment).

And while this is by no means the best novel I've ever written, or even the best first draft I've ever written, the story is holding together pretty well. And my transitions are solid.

In Lesson 5, I have a guy being murdered. Dying. Dead.

And then discovering that while he's dead and not breathing, he is still thinking, still aware. And he can in fact make his corpse move. Here's the end of that scene...

He unlocked the door. Opened it.

Put a finger to his lips, beckoned her in.

Grabbed one of the pencils he used for sketching out one-off designs, and on it wrote, "Mr. Smith tried to kill me. I'm hurt pretty bad. I need you to close the shop, run across the street to the hardware store, and get me some duct tape. Take money from the register to buy it, but save the receipt."

She stared at him, mouth hanging open, about half a second from a scream.

He didn't let her see the hole in his neck. He just shook his head. Wrote, "It looks worse than it is. Duct tape. Hurry."

She nodded. Told the couple they had to go, that the boss had an emergency, that she had to close the shop.

She left, and the bells on the door jangled behind her.

He closed his eyes. Tried to form a seal with his hand, tried to breathe in and out. Fake it 'til you make it, he thought. But there was no faking it. Maybe once he'd sealed the hole with the duct tape...

So what's the transition question for Scene 1?

This one is really easy, so I'm just going to give it to you.

ANSWER: Why is the dead guy still thinking and moving?

Obvious, right?

So now, how does that question create the transition?

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Think this through and see if you can figure it out on your own. If you can, you'll be one step ahead in training your mind to create good transitions.

When you think you have it, turn to the next page.

The question you have planted in the reader's mind makes the reader want and need to know what happens with the not-exactly-dead guy (at least if the reader likes books that include that sort of thing).

If this isn't you, just remember that you're not reading this novel because you like it.

You're reading *Dead Man's Party* in its raw form because you're a writer, and your job is to eat the elephant, and even if this elephant isn't to your particular taste, it is going to be full of nutritious examples.

So, with my explanation above, we now have RULE Number 3 of Writing Good Transitions:

- Every good scene gives the reader a transition question.

Why? And does it need to be written for the reader in the form of a question.

“Why” is because your objective as a writer is to keep your reader engaged with your story, and to do this, you have to give your reader an ongoing NEED to keep reading to find out what happens next.

But, NO, it doesn't have to be written in the form of a question. It simply has to create in the reader's mind the “what happens next” question.

This isn't just for potboilers and suspense novels. This is for every single kind of fiction.

If you want the reader to read YOU, you need to give the reader reasons to keep reading right to the very last page.

This is what I think of as a HARD transition.

- I know that I have four characters I have to introduce to the reader
- I need the reader to understand that there are four interlinked stories going on that are all going to intersect

- I need to get my reader up to speed on the starting points for all four of these characters quickly
- And then I need to move the readers smoothly through four separate views of the same story, and intersect those stories into one tight, compelling ending

So... I ended the first chapter with a dead-but-moving jeweler waiting for a girl to bring him duct tape so he can fix his sliced-open, bled-out knife wound — punctuated by an ellipsis, no less — then jump straight to a new character in a new location with a completely different problem.

Whether the reader sticks with me at this point depends on how interesting the next character and next problem is, **but also** on how much the reader wants to keep reading to find out about the dead guy.

Here's the dark side of every possible transition you can do:

- You're going to lose some readers no matter what you decide...
- because every possible transition is going to annoy someone, or
- because the story you're telling is not the story the reader wants you to have written

This sucks, but it's unavoidable.

However, you can eliminate a lot of damage and reader loss by never writing a transition scene... that is, a scene that shows the reader what's happening while nothing important is happening.

Stuck in the mud for a whole chapter is a classic example of a “transition scene” and the only thing it tells the reader is “The writer doesn't know where this story is going, or why it matters.”

- You have to know (or figure out) where your story is going.
- You have to know (or figure out) why it matters.

If you don't get it in first draft, you can get it in revision, but the closer to the end of the book you get, the more clear the answers to those two questions should be for you.

ANYWAY...

My first scene was important because the first of two main characters is murdered, but fails to stay dead.

My second scene leaps to the point of view of a waitress working in an interstate truck stop in an undisclosed location who is pretty enough to get hit on, but afraid to be recognized by a famous guy who walks in.

The Lesson 6 scene I'm highlighting features Amanda, my novel's other main character. She's a truck stop waitress, and waiting for the man she fell in love with to find her. She's been waiting about ten years.

Here's the next chunk of text that contains a transition question.

Amanda had an unfortunate past, and she was doing everything she could to keep it in the past.

And then a man she knew walked in.

Tall, handsome, intelligent, surrounded by admirers. People looked up from their tables and recognized him, and some scrambled for napkins and pens while others got out their cell phones and started snapping pictures or just catching him on video.

He was Harry Tankred. THE Harry Tankred from blockbuster movies and the occasional rom-com, and once when she'd been considerably younger, he'd been her high school boyfriend.

He'd been a nice guy back then. Hell, she'd been a nice girl back then. Or at least, the woman whose body she now wore had been a nice girl back then.

[until she wasn't – this bit requires an edit in revision]

She knew him because she'd kept all the dead woman's memories.

He'd know her, though, because while the woman she'd been had been a vile, manipulative monster, a social climber, and eventually a power-hungry witch, he'd been the poor dumb bastard who'd fallen in love with her.

So, go back to the worksheet, and write in the transition question. Do not go to the answer on the next page until you've written it down, and if you can't get it from the excerpt, read the whole Lesson Six Novel Demo.

The chapter has other scenes in it, and you can go through them and find the transition questions in them on your own for practice if you want.

I'll just be doing this question-and-answer format for specific scenes in each chapter, though (where the chapter has more than one).

MEMORY JOG: RULE ONE of writing transitions:

- Never hand a reader an excuse to quit reading your work

MEMORY JOG: RULE TWO of writing transitions:

- A good transition leaves your reader with a question for which that reader wants (or better, *needs*) to discover an answer.

MEMORY JOG: RULE THREE of writing transitions:

- *Every good scene* contains a Transition Question.

So, what is the Transition Question for this scene?

Write your answer down on your worksheet before you go to the next page.

And here is the...

ANSWER: Why does a truck-stop waitress have a rich, famous ex-boyfriend, and why is she hiding from him?

So now we're going to just run through a handful of scenes from my demo novel, and you're going to follow this same procedure — Read the scene segment as a refresher (if you've been keeping up with the demo novel. If not, read the demo novel in lessons 5-13 before doing this lesson).

Then just work your way through the next series of selected scene bits, identifying and writing down the Transition Questions before checking your work against my answers.

Here's the next chunk of text that contains a transition question.

With his two car trays of drinks, he drove to the Wendy's half a block down the street, parked at the back of their parking lot, emptied all of his packets of salt into the first Coke, waited for the fizzing to die down a bit, and then started drinking.

When he finished the first one, he moved to the second. Then the third. Then the fourth.

He could feel things happening inside him by that point. Little sparks, little fizzes, tingles down his fingers. The sugary liquid would be immediate fuel for his brain and organs. The salt and water were working their way through cell membranes into emptied blood vessels.

By the fifth one, he had to stop because of a cramping in his gut. Well, that wasn't surprising. He'd forced down nearly three liters of liquid in roughly fifteen minutes.

He didn't want to throw up, so he stopped.

Waited, because if he did have to throw up, he was going to have to get more to drink once he finished... and he didn't want to find out what happened if he barfed while driving.

He didn't puke.

He did, however, feel his heart thud inside his chest. Just once. But it had happened.

More electrolytes, he thought.

He got out of his car, walked inside the Wendy's, ordered two jumbo Cokes and two large fries, and from the condiments section grabbed most of the salt packets.

And then he got back in his car, drove down the street to the Wal-Mart, and parked in that parking lot.

No one would notice a guy in a car in that parking lot who was eating fries and sipping a drink.

This one is a bit tougher.

Give it some thought, write the answer on your worksheet, and then go to the next page.

ANSWER: Can the dead guy restart his body, and get it to be a healthy, alive thing again? Not just now, but *ever*?

As I'm writing this, I don't yet know the answer to that. And I have to tell you, this is one of the Transition Questions that for me makes going back to write more of the story a lot of fun.

—

This is next is a scene from Lesson 8, in which I'm introducing a new character. I'll point out that earlier, I gave this character the name Ben Meyers. It changed to Jaro Avemann somehow... Still the same guy, so I'll have to correct that in the revision.

Starting in the middle of the scene here:

"I'm always good," she said, and her laugh was delightfully raunchy. At that moment, he saw the wedding band on her left ring finger, the little engagement ring with the modest diamond tucked back of it. Not Amanda, he thought.

Or perhaps Amanda with a protective disguise.

He would test.

First he would eat, though. Hope could die again later.

So he got his porterhouse steak, his broccoli, his salad with vinegar and oil dressing, his scrambled eggs, his extra butter.

"That," the waitress said when she put the food in front of him, "is how a man is supposed to eat."

With his mouth full of steak, he just nodded.

After, when she came by and he pulled out his driver card and his cash -- being a trucker and using this truck stop gave him a good discount on both the meal and the shower he'd take at the next one -- and as he handed them to her, he said, "By the way, have you ever flown over the Alps in a Cessna?"

She stopped in the middle of taking his money and stared at him. For just an instant, he thought, Yes. It's her.

And then she burst out laughing. "The Alps. In Europe? Honey, I have never been out of east Texas. I have barely been out of of this little town. And flying? Oh, no, no, no. My feet stay on the ground."

She walked away still laughing.

When she came back, she offered him change, he told her to keep what constituted a hefty tip, and she handed him back his punched card with an appreciative smile.

He said, "By the way, does a woman named Amanda work here?"

She thought. "Night shift... we have an Amelia. No Amanda."

He sighed. Thanked her. Went back out into the heat, into the setting sun, and was thankful that he was driving east.

Maybe next time.

Maybe some day.

So... what's the Transition Question here? (And just noting again, if you can't pull it out of the section above and memory of having read the whole thing, you do need to read the whole thing.

Write the question on your worksheet before going to the next page.

ANSWER: Will Jaro ever find Amanda?

The love story in this first draft is pretty light so far, but considering that this is the guy an AI goddess brought down the whole Underworld to protect, it needs to be important in the story and to the reader.

Onward...

I skipped the Lesson 9 scene. I broke things a bit by changing voice from third person to first person in the middle of the scene.

So we're going to Lesson Ten's scene, and to the last part of Amanda in the Underworld here:

Maybe this wasn't a trap. Maybe it was the hunter, flushing game out of the underbrush because game was easier to see when it was moving.

This, she thought, was possibly the truth.

She had to assume it knew where she was hiding.

But she also had to assume that it would be watching for her to make some noise, to bolt, to panic and get out into the open where she would be an easier target.

What did smart game do?

Did it freeze, hoping that the hunter would chase the game that ran.

Did it move slowly and quietly, hoping that the hunter would not catch its absence.

No. Neither of those.

The smart game animal turned itself into a hunter, and hunted the thing that was coming after it.

Her heart rate slowed.

Her breathing steadied.

She had a pretty good idea that *Howdies* was something created by the man she'd known as God. The one who had never been chipped, who had never had an implant, who had simply used a tactile virtual console that let him read her without her being able to read him.

God had kept himself apart from the machine, had never entered the Underworld he'd made.

But *Howdies* had the smell of him in it. That warm, welcoming beam of light had been him. She was sure of it, because it was how he appeared to her each time she said her prayer.

It was how he had urged her to tell him everything, how he'd made her feel good about what she was doing, how he rewarded her.

That beam of light...

She could use it against him. If he was in the Underworld, he'd been chipped. There was no way to enter it without a straight-to-brain connector. And if he was in her realm, she could find him.

Would find him.

Would end him, the way she'd ended all his top-level associates, those whom he'd rewarded with demi-god status in the Underworld. Those who had been kings and presidents and dictators in the physical world.

Yes. This she would do. She would create a forth entry into the Underworld, one that only she had.

And she would track him, find him, and destroy him, so that the Underworld could finally come to an end.

What's the Transition Question? Write it down on the worksheet, then go to the next page.

The question here is pretty simple compared to some of the others:

ANSWER: Can Amanda become the hunter instead of the hunted?

This is a good, solid question that makes her not a victim but a hero, someone the reader can cheer for as she takes on her evil creator.

Next scene bit, this from the very end of the Lesson 11 demo, and shows us Andy (the dead guy) running pretty well at the moment, though still not convincingly a live guy....

(Andy) Noticed one of the white ceiling panels was not seated correctly in its supports. Stood on the toilet seat, pushed up the panel, and found his prize. Bill's suit, toupee, false fingerprints, jowl pads. And with them, his real fingerprints – on the backs of the fake ones. Saliva samples. Skin samples from the toupee tape. And Bill's scent, strongest under the armpits of the shirt and the crotch of the pants.

Andy had a dog's senses of smell and hearing. A bird of prey's augmented vision. And now he was going to put them to use.

First, though, he was going to send off the fake fingerprints and the jowl pads to a private lab to get the real fingerprints, the DNA from the saliva.

Bill Zomady was in the Underworld. He had never been there before. But he was there now.

The Underworld required a DNA identifier, and a direct neural connection. A jack.

And if you had the DNA identifier, you could connect directly to someone jacked in. Could take them by surprise. Could slide into their mind,

could make them do things they would not otherwise do.

That had been part of the fun for the rich and powerful back in the day – the demigods of the Underworld.

Now, Andy thought, it was going to give him the last, the greatest, the most important enemy free human beings had ever faced.

The one-time god of the Underworld.

What's the Transition Question? Write it down on the worksheet, then go to the next page.

The question here is:

ANSWER: Will Andy find what he needs to track down Bill?

And again, it gives us something to cheer for.

So now we jump back to Amanda who has hunted down an old Underworld station so she can use the hardwired jack to plug in rather than her programmed self-powered jack:

The Underworld sign was still over the old side-door entrance. Graffitied over with some impressive profanity, but other than that, the place looked intact.

She went in, found that it had been used by other folks, though. The beds were gone, but there were some bottles lying around. Leaves, dirt that had blown in, more graffiti on the walls.

No current inhabitants, but blankets suggested either teenagers looking for places to get laid, or homeless looking for a place out of the weather.

She would need a place out of sight – and this station had once had two hundred simultaneous ports. That was small for a town of this size [TC- have I given this town a name?], but the only reason this town hadn't dried up completely was that it had an offramp from the Interstate.

Two hundred jacks. She only needed one that still worked.

She walked to the row of wall units farthest from the door, and found a plug that still had its port cover.

Held her breath, because plugging in to the underworld from a public jack was going to be risky. If God was in there, odds were pretty good he'd see her come in.

There are TWO Transition Questions for this scene. You only need to get one of them, but I just want to let you know that there are two.

What's the Transition Question? Write it down on the worksheet, then go to the next page.

ANSWER 1: Can Amanda create a new entrance to the Underworld?

ANSWER 2: How can this go wrong?

How can this go wrong? is a great transition question. And it can be implied subtly.

She's going into an area has had people in it, that is mostly abandoned, that is run down, that is out of sight.

She's pretty, female, not big or strong. She might be really intelligent, but she's only ten in human years, and not very human at all, and there's just a whole lot she doesn't know about how the real world works.

Okay.

LAST example, this from Lesson 13 and from the POV of my villain, Bill:

He became fascinated by the problem. There was someone high up in the little town, someone who knew about the AIs, or who was one. Someone who had been willing to cover up a horrific, brutal murder and keep the death out of the news... Why?

That was the stopper, wasn't it?

And then he realized the truth.

Someone – one of the AIs on someone who had managed to connect into the Underworld and gain some control of it... Maybe a competitor?... was on to him. Had figured out that God was back.

There were two ways this could go down, Bill thought.

The first was that he would have to negotiate with his competitor, check the Underworld for any traps

now built into it that might be there to enslave him.

The second was that he would have to track down the second AI in the little town where Andy had died, and kill that one off in a particularly horrific manner. Make up a second story, tie it in with Andy's, make sure the media got wind of the sort of evil that was possible in small towns everywhere – places where people had privacy.

That would be his play, he thought. Prove that because the world had gone back to being an evil place, because individuals had privacy, they were doing the most terrible things imaginable with that privacy.

He'd make the world afraid. And then he would offer them a way back into some new version of the Underworld, this one a place where the promise was simple. When everyone is watched and nothing is private, nothing bad can ever happen.

He laughed.

They'd buy that. It had been long enough.

And then... then he would show them how bad their lives could be.

"Thank you," he whispered to the creature who had tipped him off to what was going on. "Thank you for showing me how to get them all back."

What's the Transition Question? Write it down on the worksheet, then go to the next page.

ANSWER: Can Bill regain his power as God of the Underworld?

So now you've worked your way through my fiction, and have wrapped your head around the concept of the Transition Question.

Time to read your own work and go through each scene (NOT MAKING ANY CHANGES) and discover:

- If you have a Transition Question for your reader
- What the Transition Question is, and where in the scene you find it
- If the scene doesn't have one, what question would you LIKE it to have

The last is simply a note you'll hang onto for once your novel is finished. You make no changes now, but knowing which scenes lack Transition Questions and what you'd like those questions to be will save you some time when you do your revision.

Your Turn

Go through your own manuscript and fill out the second section of the worksheet with your own questions.

And from now on, as you're writing your novel, make sure each scene gives your reader something essential to ask that you can answer later in your story.

But...?

You were expecting something about cliffhangers, or ten different ways to end scenes, or what to do when a character is traveling?

The fact is, there are no rules about how you have to end these scenes, or when or where you have to pick them up, or whose point of view you have to follow in any given scene.

There are a few little guidelines I've come up with over the years:

- If your transition question is small enough to be easily forgettable by the reader, follow that scene with the same character and a bigger question
- If the transition question is BIG (LIKE: Why is the dead guy still moving?) you can bring in a couple other characters and a couple other scenes before coming back to that character again
- In first draft, you don't worry about your timeline, or about how characters get from one place to another. You just put them where the story needs them to be, and acknowledge that you'll have to do a bit of clean-up in revision

But that's it. **You are the boss of your story**, and in first draft, your focus is on writing fun, compelling scenes and having each one give your reader something he or she NEEDS to know, that you can supply on later pages.

Next Week...

The Fun and Friendly Approach to Writing Meaningful Fiction: Allegory + Theme = The Subtext Your Readers WANT

Allegory, theme, and subtext are generally considered the sole realm of literary novelists.

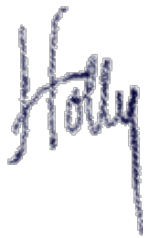
But when you tell stories that meaningful to yourself AND your reader, you make the experience of writing your fiction rewarding for yourself, and the act of reading your work MEMORABLE for your fans.

Allegory, theme, and subtext are the secret sauce that compels a reader pick up your book a second and third time, and read it again because every time they read it, they discover something new. Something deeper.

I've written intentional, planned subtext and themes in every novel I've written since the first one that sold -- *Fire in the Mist*.

And next week you'll learn THAT.

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The letters are cursive and fluid, with a long vertical stroke on the 'y'.

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*