

# Six Scene Settings to Avoid

In screenwriting, it's all about location, location, location

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In the realty racket, professionals will tell you that regarding the sale and purchase of homes, the three items that matter most are 1) location, 2) location, and 3) location.

The particular location of scenes and settings in screenplays is important, too.

Many movies today rely too heavily upon the advancement of story and expansion of character (which sounds like two things but is really only one) by dialogue. Back in the silent

era, when dialogue could appear only as text printed on cards that were then photographed and cut into the movie, writers knew to keep the blather short. They appreciated that audiences do not come to movie theaters to read a lot of text onscreen. If they want to read, they can stay home and open a book.

Upon the arrival of sound, now approximately ninety years ago, there descended upon movies a plague of characters yakking. Alas, it has never entirely gone away.

The players are not called "talkers," but "actors."

When the director is ready to shoot, she says, "Lights, camera, ...talk?"

I don't think so.

Movies crave, and audiences desire, not talk but action.

Too often, instead of actors acting out the details of the story, in bulky, blocky exchanges of dialogue they narrate it.

In the interest of writing movies that move, films that are distinguishable from programs available on radio, here are a half dozen settings to avoid:

## **1. Telephones**

I endured an hour of a movie on Netflix before shutting it off.

During those sorry sixty minutes, I counted no fewer than eleven phone calls. Nowadays, with everyone having a phone in their pocket, it's a bigger threat than ever before.

Audiences do not show up at the theater, or power up the flat screen, to watch and listen to characters talking on the telephone.

## **2. Cars**

Characters riding around in cars and talking to each other is not action.

Sure, scenery may flow past the vehicle. It is not the vehicle, however, that is supposed to move, but the story.

If you plunk characters in a car, what else are they going to but talk?

## **3. Bars**

Again, seat people at a bar in a cocktail lounge and what are they going to other than talk?

## **4. Restaurants**

Ditto.

Likewise, cafes.

Almost inevitably, it's characters sitting around the table, running their mouths, telling the story rather than acting it out.

Moreover, in this era of 'intersectionality,' people sitting in cars and bars and restaurants inevitably also have cell phones in their purses and pockets. I see movie after movie where characters are yakking away in, say, a restaurant, only to be interrupted by a phone call. A boring conversation in a car is interrupted by a boring conversations on a phone.

## 5. Living rooms

People sitting around in a living room (or at the kitchen or dining room table) are likely to populate scenes where they merely pronounce dialogue rather than engage in action.

## 6. Offices

Here's yet another venue where the performers are likely to chat rather than, well, perform. Such settings encourage suppressed action and expanded dialogue.

That said, all rules are off if the scenes are integrated. That is to say, if something actually *happens* in the scene, if there is action to see rather than dialogue merely to *hear*, anything goes.

*Moonstruck* opens in a restaurant. Cher as Loretta, and her

date, order their dinners. In doing so, however, tons of information are revealed regarding the nature of their characters. The date gets down on his knees in the restaurant in order to propose marriage. Again, things are *happening*.

In a pilot for a new *Mary Tyler Moore* TV series, after being interrupted for the fourth time by a phone call, Mary's character seizes the instrument, rips it from the wall (this was during the where there were still no cells but only hard wires), and tosses it across the room, thereby revealing to her would-be employer, and also to the audience, commendable and dramatic aspects of her character.

Alexander Payne's masterful *About Schmidt* opens in an office, where the only action is the sweep hand of a large clock ticking off the seconds, one at a time. Nevertheless, we learn a great deal about the protagonist's personality and situation.

In *Terminator II* a man walks into a bar, where a scene plays out. The man, however, is naked Austrian. He confronts a biker shooting pool, and requisitions both his clothes and his Harley. Again, they don't sit down at the bar and converse. The scene is driven not by mere dialogue but, again, by action.

Massive improvements can be achieved in a scene simply by moving it to another setting, one which is conducive not to dialogue but action.

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