

Tips for Writing Scenes with Multiple Characters: as in, what *do* you do with a drunken sailor?

So it's been smooth sailing so far in your story-writing, or to use another cliché, it's been clear skies until now: an important moment in both your plot and character development, when the storm hits. You've got to include numerous characters in one scene. Suddenly, you're knee-deep, waves sloshing over the bow, and trying to bail. Why? Because apparently, you're having a party, everyone's invited, including Old Cap'n Two-Parrots, and you've got to help the reader keep track of names, personalities, motivations and plot developments.

Concerns:

How to portray characters as memorable and distinct

Not letting readers feel overwhelmed with names and characters to keep straight

Not letting confusion cloud plot/plot events

How to show who is speaking and when without overdoing speaker tags

Maintaining authentic voices

Keeping scene moving despite the many moving parts/characters

Tips

1. Keeping the voices distinct here is the most crucial point. So make both what characters say and how they say it relevant to the plot and authentic to the character. Are they bossy? Do they ask questions? Use rejoinders or epithets? Interrupt? Use long or short sentences?
2. Don't introduce all the characters at once if you can help it.
3. When you do bring in a new character, make sure to reinforce their traits quickly. Ideally, the names will resonate with these qualities. Link concepts in readers' minds, even subtly. Try, if possible, to attach names, when introduced, to a grounding character detail.
4. Particularly if this is the first time a character has appeared in the story, make sure names are not too visually or auditorily similar.
5. You may need to use names and speech tags more during a group scene more often than if only two characters were in the room (instead of mere pronouns). However, of course, you still want to rely on making each character distinct enough to stand out w/o this help.

Consider roles/functions/stations in life. If one character is bossy, can they be the one who argues no one at the table can have more than one roll on the first pass around of the dish, etc.? This will help readers immediately realize who is talking. Cap'n Two-Parrots is hopefully not a total cliché, but most likely, he's not going to be the one asking all the questions; he'll be the one singing off-key sea chanties.

Do the character work first, before writing the scene. Once you do, it will be a delight to write and indulge in the recognition that yes, if Hector begins choking, Chandra will be the one to help him and Hiro will dive under the table to retrieve the golden fork or sloshing rum bottle. Why? Because you know them. If you do the character work ahead of time, writing these interactive scenes feels like coming home.

Get feedback. Yes, it's a no-brainer. But have a friend, preferably one who has not read your book, read the scene and tell you if and when they were lost as to characters. You might even try handing them the scene (as an experiment) with extremely minimal speech tags. If you can write a scene with multiple characters and the voice is so distinct that none are needed, you've succeeded brilliantly with character development! It's like hitting that sweet spot between the gears on a standard engine; if you know when to switch, if you know your engine, you may not even have to clutch.

DON'TS:

Don't overcompensate by overdoing speech tags or using character's names in speech all the time. However, you may need to lean on this a little more heavily than usual. Remember, using one every so often can clear it up for several lines.

Don't forget to use action tags to break up the monotony of dialogue tags.

Don't slow down the pacing with long character descriptions. Work in one or two unique, identifying details naturally. If you must include a setting and or character info dump, do it at

natural conversational lulls, not in the middle of the action. (And a scene with multiple characters very likely means 'action' even if it's not a rock 'em/sock 'em fight scene!

Prompt: Write a scene with at least four characters.

Choice A: Include at least four characters, who are already in the room and whom the reader has been introduced to before (like an attempt at a party scene in your novel). Now an event or newcomer shakes thing up, and we want to see at least all for react and speak a few times. Aim to make it as clear as possible who is speaking when, even without speech tags.

Choice B: Introduce, one by one, at least four characters into a room/scene. Try to try traits and speech patterns to each one as they are introduced so that we can keep them straight. Then, an event, again, will throw them into some kind of controversy with a group conversation.

though I'm standing inside a room where four girls have died in during the last two years. And even though, worst of all, I'm standing on a bloodstain that the Ward didn't even bother to clean up or paint over before opening this room up and taking in three more girls.

So I add, standing straighter, "You can just call me Cassie."

The young girl nods gravely, her wide eyes taking me in before she steps into the dismal room and schooches aside to let another girl in, and then another. Now there's three girls who look nothing alike, but they're all identically young and terrified. Later, I'll give them names to carry with them in this new world. For now, I just have to figure out how to keep them calm.

Once they're all huddled together with their few belongings and barely taking up the space of two people, the first one juts her pointy chin out toward me. "This is our room?"

"Yeah. They don't usually triple kids up, but maybe since you went through Quarantine together, they figured you'd like to stay together."

Now all the girls nod, sharing familiar glances. Then the tallest one says in a scratchy voice, "At least we have dressers, right? And a rug. We didn't even have a rug in Quarantine."

My feet burn. The rug we're standing on, I grabbed from my room to throw over the bloodstain, and it's only covering part of it. It's not just that I don't want to terrify these girls. It's that the B-Box head orderly, Chipper, was supposed to get this cleaned up before the girls moved in, and if the Security Officer sees it, Chipper might get sacked.

I don't care much for Chipper. She's pretty useless. But firing Chipper is change, and change is bad. Maybe not in the real world. But here, in the Ward, change only moves in one direction.

"Why don't you unpack," I say, pointing at the two closets and the three rickety dressers. "It'll give you something to do."

"Okay," the first girl says. "Then you're going to teach us how to live here in the Ward?"

"I'm going to teach how you to survive," I answer, because I can't lie, but I can't bear to frighten them more than they already are. They've been through so much. Torn out of foster homes, maybe good ones, maybe awful ones, told they have a terminal disease, then shoved into a quarantine cell for a month first— sometimes I think the Ward does that just to make this hospital seem less hellish in comparison. "Now you three help each other settle in. That's where we start. We help each other. We take *care* of each other here," I add more firmly.

"Okay. But I'm scared," the smallest girl says. She has pigtails and a Pox mark just on the tip of her nose that makes her look absolutely adorable. Her nose even twitches a little as she's crying.

"It's okay, Bunny," I say. That's her new Ward name, although she doesn't realize it yet. As Box Leader, I have the right to assign names. "It's okay. We're gonna get through this."