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

So it's been smoothing sailing so far in your story-writing, or to use another cliché, it's been clear skies until this moment: 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 keep characters memorable and distinct

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

Not letting confusion cloud plot/events

How to show who is speaking and when w/o overdoing speaker tags

Maintaining authentic voices

These tips will help you tackle these!

1. **Keeping the voices distinct** here is crucial. It's okay, if the three teens who are not central to the plot, all sound a little similar. But if you're writing YA, then you'd need to dive down deeper and flesh out personality in each voice. So make both *what* they 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?

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.

Thus, we want to do CHARACTER WORK BEHIND THE SCENES!

Consider roles. 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-Parents may not be a 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.

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