



17 Scene Reversal Ideas

Keep Your Audiences Guessing

by Sherri Sheridan

Almost every scene in your film should have a reversal to build up suspense. Reversals keep the audience guessing as to what is going to happen next, and pulls them into the story, prompting them to search for the new surprise. Once you understand reversals, you will see them in every good movie.

How to create a scene reversal:

- ✍ Introduce a character with a clear scene goal.
- ✍ Create a set of expectations in viewers' minds as to how the goal will be accomplished.
- ✍ Introduce complications, conflict, or interactions.
- ✍ List several ways the audience expects a character to achieve a goal and have the character fail at each attempt.
- ✍ During the character's last attempt to accomplish the goal, have the character do something unexpected and succeed. This usually involves something being in the scene that the audience does not yet know about.

When constructing reversals, look at your character's scene goal first and whether or not they succeed or fail. Then ask yourself how they can accomplish that goal outcome in an unexpected way.

17 Scene Reversal Ideas:

- (1) Character behaves in a shocking or surprising way.
- (2) Someone gets murdered or hurt unexpectedly.
- (3) Character has a sudden extreme emotional outburst that makes the audience wonder what is happening.



This hidden parachute could pop out at a key moment when the character jumps off some rocks to create a scene reversal surprise.

- (4) Character does something unexpected and accomplishes the scene goal when we think he will fail.
- (5) Antagonist appears by chance.
- (6) Antagonist is in pursuit of protagonist when plan is blocked or ruined by an accident or unexpected event.
- (7) Confrontation escalates.
- (8) Character displays surprising skills or abilities in accomplishing the scene goal in an unexpected way.

- (9) Antagonistic character pops up out nowhere and is mistaken for someone else.
- (10) Characters use a secret plan or equipment to get out of a bad situation that the audience does not know about.
- (11) Perceived threat turns out to be a false alarm.
- (12) Loved one placed in unexpected danger.
- (13) Characters accomplish the scene goal in surprising ways against all odds.
- (14) Character admits to lying earlier about a situation then tells a shocking truth.
- (15) One character confronts another about a lie, and then, all the characters agree to ignore the lie for a greater good.
- (16) Plot goal object or information becomes harder to retrieve.
- (17) Helpful scene development turns out to be full of danger.

Sherri Sheridan teaches storytelling techniques to digital filmmakers and animators with her books, classes and workshops. She's also the creative director at Minds Eye Media in San Francisco (www.mindseyemedia.com), where she directs, produces, animates, writes and designs projects for a wide range of clients. Sherri is the author of the books, "Maya 2 Character Animation" (New Riders 1999) and "Developing Digital Short Films" (New Riders / Peachpit / Pearson 2004). Recently, she created a 20 hour DV workshop based on the books called, "Writing a Great Script Fast," available at MyFlik.com.

INTERACT: Discuss films and scenes that illustrate each of the 17 scene reversal ideas. Post your ideas, comments, and questions online at the industry forums moderated by experts at www.studentfilmmakers.com/bb.

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