

# COLORING SCENES: Writing to Engage the Reader

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It's all in the writing. After all the [structuring is done](#), the scenes themselves have to entertain. Most often, when I read a script, I think to myself, "It needs color." Color the characters; color the scenes; color the dialogue. It's all in the writing.

## William Goldman shows how

Consider William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*. Here is an outline of three scenes from that screenplay:

The Man in Black defeats the Spaniard.

The Man in Black defeats the Giant.

The Man in Black defeats the Sicilian.

It doesn't sound particularly exciting, and it doesn't have to—it's an [outline](#). Fortunately, Goldman *colored* those scenes and they are three wonderful scenes that most everyone enjoys.

My personal favorite is "The Battle of the Wits" section of the third scene. The Man in Black apparently pours deadly iocane powder into one of two goblets of wine. The scene ends with a lovely twist after Vizzini dies from drinking the wine in the Man in Black's goblet.

The Man in Black starts to lead Buttercup off the mountain path into untraveled terrain.

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                BUTTERCUP
              (a final glance back
                toward Vizzini)
    To think - all that time it was your
    cup that was poisoned.
                MAN IN BLACK
    They were both poisoned. I spent the
    last few years building up an immunity
    to iocane powder.
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And with that, he takes off, dragging her behind him.

Not only do movies benefit from an unexpected twist but scenes do, too.

It doesn't matter if the location is boring or typical; it's how you color the scene itself that makes the difference. Let's examine a fairly typical scene from a Western. I think you will find it only moderately interesting. (We'll color it later.)

## A typical scene

Winslow is the [central character](#) who is a bad guy trying to reform, but who believes nothing he can do will make up for his evil past. Prior to this scene, he brought in the murderer Bradford to be hanged. The reference to the bloody pregnant woman is from something in Winslow's past that haunts him.

EXT. TOWN - DAY

The sun shines on the desert. It reveals the little town. It is the 1880s.

Near a gallows by the Sheriff's Office is a small crowd. A SHERIFF and a MINISTER are there along with Winslow. The wind is blowing.

POV WINSLOW - He spots a Pregnant Woman in the crowd. She is about nine months. For just a moment her belly looks bloody.

A crow squawks. Winslow sees the Pregnant Woman is fine and is shaking his head.

The Minister is looking at Winslow.

MINISTER

This Bradford guy is evil beyond redemption. His soul is going to Hell for sure unless he repents, and this town can know that the retribution of the Lord comes upon all those who do wickedly. And there is no wavering of his all-searching Eye.

WINSLOW

(muttering)

Is that so?

MINISTER

All here in the Bible. Almighty God has spoken it.

He holds the Bible in the air and looks up to Heaven.

SHERIFF

It takes a devil to catch a devil, Minister. And that's Winslow here. Why he caught him in Mexican territory and brought him back across the border just to be hanged for justice. May God have mercy on his soul.

The Minister nods in the affirmative.

Off screen, the loud creak of a door reveals DEPUTIES exiting the Sheriff's Office with Bradford.

At the gallows, the Deputies halt Bradford by the Minister.

Winslow catches Bradford's eye.

MINISTER (O.S.)

Young man. It's never too late for repentance.

Winslow's thoughts turn to that word "repentance." He thinks about his past.

MINISTER (CONT'D)

It is never too late to offer repentance for one's transgressions against -

Bradford interrupts by spitting on the ground. The Deputies drag Bradford up the gallows' steps. He is shouting at Winslow on the way.

BRADFORD

I'll see you in Hell!

WINSLOW

(muttering)

I reckon.

The Deputies are putting the noose around Bradford's neck. He gags a little.

WINSLOW

Make sure it's loose to break his neck. No need to suffer.

The Deputies step aside, one pulls the lever. The trap door releases and Bradford falls. His neck breaks with a crack.

Winslow spots two black suited PINKERTON AGENTS headed for him.

## A quick evaluation of the typical scene

Now if you had submitted the above to me, I'd say it's in fairly good form, but it lacks color. And I would provide the following advice.

Avoid passive verbs (too much use of "is" and "are"). Use active verbs and specific details.

You don't need the words "Off screen" or the camera direction "POV."

Dramatize dramatic moments, such as the hanging. Maybe a bit of humor would help the scene. When I evaluate a script, I often see [overwriting](#). This particular scene is underwritten. It's a key scene that needs more drama and a greater sense of the characters' emotions. [I can say that it's a key scene, having read the entire script.]

You have a crow squawk; maybe it should preside over the scene as a bad-luck symbol. Also, use it for a transition from the vision of the bloody pregnant woman back to scene.

Characterize your characters. Right now, they're rather typical of what we've seen in other movies. You can characterize them by how you describe facial expressions, gestures, and actions. Again, use specific language.

Contrast the sheriff and the minister; emphasize differences. That will help define both. Maybe you can label them more definitively as a characterization tool. For example, what kind of sheriff and what kind of minister? I'm looking for an adjective for each.

At one point, Winslow says, "Is that so?" It might be a good place for him to express his belief that the good he does can never make up for the bad. "Ain't enough" leaves a little room for subtext.

Some of the dialogue is obvious. "I'll see you in Hell" is typical, but could work if there is an original follow-up line or comeback line.

You wrote, "Winslow's thoughts turn to that word 'repentance.' He thinks about his past." Thoughts, insights, and feelings cannot appear on the movie screen. Describe an action or a look that can appear on the movie screen, something that the actor can act.

## Coloring the typical scene

The scene below was written by a client who graciously gave me permission to share it. (The script is entitled *Chasing Redemption* by Daniel P. Douglas). The "original" above is the same scene written by me in an attempt to imitate what I so often see in screenplays that I evaluate.

Let's see how my client colored his scene, which I'm sure you'll find more entertaining than the "original" above. The best learning will come when you carefully compare the "original" with the "revision" paragraph by paragraph, speech by speech.

EXT. TOWN - DAY

A little past sunrise over a desert that surrounds a speck of early 1880s civilization.

Near gallows tucked away by the Sheriff's Office, wind kicks up dust around a small crowd.

A ROUGH SHERIFF, a TIMID MINISTER, and Winslow stand in a row at the base of the gallows' steps.

Winslow's gaze drifts to the crowd, lands on a very PREGNANT WOMAN. He fixates on her big belly.

WINSLOW'S TWISTED VISION

Movements slow, sounds dissipate, save for Winslow's hastened breathing.

In a flash, horror grips Winslow. Blood blankets the pregnant woman's belly.

A woman's scream rises. It mutates into a crow's loud squawk.

BACK TO SCENE

A crow squawks overhead. Winslow shakes off the demons, sees the very Pregnant Woman is fine, and settles down.

The Timid Minister glances at the gallows - apprehension and fear pepper his features.

TIMID MINISTER

Such a devil, this Bradford. No  
measure of repentance...

(peers at Winslow)

Good for civilization you arrested  
him.

Winslow stares coldly ahead.

WINSLOW  
(muttering)

Ain't enough.

The Timid Minister didn't quite catch that.

TIMID MINISTER

Pard -

ROUGH SHERIFF

- Takes a devil to catch one,  
Preacher.

The Timid Minister clutches bible to chest.

ROUGH SHERIFF (CONT'D)

You really catch the shit bird one  
hundred feet over the Mexican border?

WINSLOW

One hundred feet from. One hundred  
feet over. Hard to say, Sheriff.

The Timid Minister's eyes bulge. The Rough Sheriff laughs.

The loud creak of a door opening draws everyone's attention. Overhead, the perched  
crow squawks.

Two very YOUNG DEPUTIES exit the Sheriff's Office with Bradford as their shackled and  
feisty prisoner. He mutters curses under rough escort.

At the gallows, the Deputies halt Bradford by the shaking Timid Minister, who swallows  
hard.

Winslow aims his hard features at Bradford.

TIMID MINISTER (O.S.)

Young man... er... forgiveness is  
the way of our Lord.

Winslow flinches at the word "forgiveness."

TIMID MINISTER (CONT'D)

It is never too late to offer repentance  
for one's transgressions against -

Bradford hocks a big old loogie onto the Timid Minister's face. The poor man recoils,  
plummets to his knees, starts barfing.

The crowd is aghast. The Sheriff is amused. The crow squawks.

The Rough Sheriff leans in, slaps Bradford hard. Winslow's calm, but side steps to  
avoid the hurling.

The Deputies drag Bradford up the gallows' steps. He shouts at Winslow on the way,  
complete with spittle flying.

BRADFORD

I'll see you in Hell!

Winslow offers subdued agreement.

BRADFORD (CONT'D)

At Satan's knee you'll be!

WINSLOW

I reckon.

The Young Deputies wrangle the noose around Bradford's neck and tighten it up good. He  
gags, restraining his wrathful speech.

ROUGH SHERIFF

Naw. You gotta loosen it some. Need  
slack to break his neck good.

The Deputies try to loosen the noose, but fail.

ROUGH SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Aw Hell. Just pull the God-damned  
lever.

The Deputies step aside, one pulls the lever with a startled yelp. The trap door  
releases and Bradford falls.

The crowd gasps! Bradford only falls a couple of feet, not enough to snap his neck. He  
twists, wheezes.

ROUGH SHERIFF (CONT'D)

(indicating top of  
gallows)

You didn't leave enough slack up  
there either.

The Deputies gaze upward, exchange uncertain glances.

ROUGH SHERIFF (CONT'D)

Aw Hell. Don't worry boys. He'll  
croak. Just let him hang a spell.

While the Rough Sheriff enjoys the moment, the Timid Minister rises, wipes his face and mouth. He glimpses Bradford's hangman dance. Eyes bulging, he's down for more vomiting.

Winslow's unshaken, but he sidesteps again to avoid more vomit. He spots two black-suited PINKERTON AGENTS traipsing a bee-line for him.

The Rough Sheriff's humor fades when he also glimpses the Pinkertons. He peers at Winslow, who's grown worrisome.

Can the above be improved? Maybe. But when I first read it, I wanted to read more, and that's because 1) I found myself getting involved with Winslow, 2) the elements of the scene and characters were not typical, 3) there is a twist with the gallows not operating properly, and 4) the writing is good.

It's all in the writing...and in coloring your scenes.