

# CHOREOGRAPHING YOUR CHARACTERS



A WORKBOOK BY SUSANNE DUNLAP





## SUSANNE DUNLAP

<https://susanne-dunlap.com>

Susanne Dunlap is the award-winning author of over a dozen historical novels, as well as an Author Accelerator Certified Book Coach in fiction, nonfiction, and memoir. Her love of history began in academia with a PhD in music history from Yale. Her novel *THE PORTRAITIST* won first prize in its category in the 2022 Eric Hoffer Book Awards, and was a finalist in the CIBA Goethe Awards and the Foreword Indies Awards. Her novel *THE ADORED ONE* was awarded first place in its category in the 2023 CIBA Goethe Awards.

Today, she lives, coaches, and writes in beautiful Biddeford, Maine.

Follow me on Substack:  
[dunlap.substack.com](https://dunlap.substack.com)

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# WHAT DO I MEAN BY CHOREOGRAPHING?

What I mean is how you move your characters (or yourself in memoir) around spaces in your story. This may sound like it should be easy, but doing it well is anything but. That's because how your characters exist in a space must reveal essential things about them, and must not interfere with the reader's experience of your story.

This workbook provides some guidelines about how to ensure that you're curating what your characters do and how they do it, where they move, what they feel, to allow your readers to fully enter into the atmosphere you're creating. At the end I've provided some exercises you may find helpful.

It's always good to start by answering some basic questions about your novel or memoir. These aspects have their own effect on how your characters behave in different spaces.

## ABOUT YOUR BOOK

Genre:

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Point:

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Story Present (Timeline):

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POV:

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# CHOREOGRAPHY GUIDELINES

There are a few things to keep in mind whenever you have a scene that involves having characters navigate a space. Not all of them will apply in all situations, but thinking about them can help you make sure your characters inhabit those spaces realistically without distracting your reader.

## THE PHYSICAL SPACE

The answers to these (perhaps obvious) questions need to be clear in your mind before you write your scene. Or, at the very least, the first time you read it through and think about it:

### 1 INTERIOR OR EXTERIOR

Is the space confined or expansive? Are there perceptible boundaries that might affect how your characters move around? Note these details here.

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### 2 SIZE

Exact dimensions or area are not important—unless they are somehow germane to your story. We’re looking for large or small, or any particular shape.

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## THE PHYSICAL SPACE, CONT.

### 3 OBSTACLES

Are there items in the space that your characters will have to maneuver around? How many, how big? Are they necessary?

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### 4 USE OF SPACE

Is the space commonly used for anything? (A dining room, a gym, a hiking trail)

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### 5 ANY OTHER PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Is there something else specific about the space that will affect how your characters move in it?

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# THE STORY SPACE

These questions relate to the role your space has in the story, what is its importance to the protagonist specifically and the characters in general. Just as it's important to get the story time right, to condense it if possible (unless you're writing a long saga), it can be important to limit the different locations where the action of your story occurs—for practical reasons if nothing else.

## 1 WHY?

Why are your characters in that particular space? What role does the space have in your story?

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## 2 WHEN?

How long will your characters be in that space, and how often do they return to it, if at all?

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## 3 WHAT?

What exactly will happen in that space that either moves the plot forward or deepens your character?

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## THE STORY SPACE, CONT.

### 4 HOW MANY?

How many characters occupy that space in this particular scene? Are all of them there at the beginning? When do they come in?

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### 5 POV?

What does your POV character see in the space at the beginning of the scene?

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### 6 LOGISTICS?

What exactly will happen in that space that either moves the plot forward or deepens your character?

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### 7 MEANING?

Does the space have any particular meaning or importance in your story? Is this a familiar or a new space?

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## PITFALLS TO WATCH FOR

As you move your characters around in different spaces, there are a few tendencies we all have that you should watch for, especially in revision. Sometimes you have to just sketch out what's going to happen before you can refine it, and that's fine. But when you look closely at a scene where something occurs in a defined space, and you have to choreograph your characters' movements, these are the common traps we all fall into.

### 1 OVER DESCRIBING

If you've answered the previous questions, you no doubt have a clear picture in your mind of what the space your characters are occupying looks like. But take care not to give the reader so much information about the space that it takes them away from the story. Only give them the relevant details, the ones that matter to the scene itself.

### 2 FILTERING

This is such a common problem in descriptions of any kind. By filtering, I mean using a construction that reminds the reader that they're seeing everything through the eyes of the POV character, and are not immersed in the scene themselves. An incomplete list: saw, heard, noticed, felt (although this one is often necessary), perceived. Usually, these words can be eliminated altogether. that doesn't mean there aren't occasions when they're necessary, however.

### 3 UNDER EXPLAINING

Yes, you can simultaneously over describe and under explain! The biggest area where writers can be guilty of this is not saying enough to make your reader understand why your characters are doing and saying whatever it is in the space. This has most to do with interiority, emotional content. When you "see" the environment through their eyes, the way they see it should be imbued with the emotions they are experiencing as they do.

# A FEW EXERCISES

## NEW CHARACTER IN A SPACE

### 1

Write a scene in which a new character comes into a space your protagonist already occupies.

## FRIGHTENING SPACE

### 2

Your character(s) enter a space that holds some kind of negative atmosphere. What do they do and say? How do they view their environment (without using any filtering)? What specific details contribute to their experience of the space?

## ROMANTIC SPACE

### 3

Characters in love will notice different things about their environment than characters who are in a state of high anxiety or fear. Write a scene that makes the couple's feelings about each other clear, but also positions them in a specific space. Could be a bedroom, could be a walk in the park.

## CONFLICT SPACE

### 4

Two characters who hate each other, or who are otherwise in conflict, are in the same room. With one of them as a POV character, write the resulting scene as they see it (feel free to give us a sword fight, LOL!). Then write the same seen through the other POV character's eyes.