When Characters Meet For The First Time

Stan C. Smith

Some of these ideas and examples are borrowed from the Writer Unboxed blog (https://writerunboxed.com/2021/07/23/close-encounters-of-the-initial-kind-tips-for-when-characters-meet), as well as other blog posts.

Yes, this is important for *romance* novels, but it's also important for any story. Don't underestimate the importance of the way your main characters meet, whether you intend for them to fall in love, try to kill each other, go on a road trip together, or anything else.

This first meeting is an opportunity to add intrigue, to develop your characters, and to reveal the main themes of your story.

Most of all, this meeting SHOULD be interesting. After all, the story is about your *characters*, right? And typically, when main characters meet, this initiates a new stage of their lives. They will never be the same again.

It's all about your characters.

Every new encounter is an opportunity to *explore and develop* your characters.

Consider these questions, to help you plan the scene of your characters meeting:

- What do your characters want from the interaction?

- What do they fear? What do they desire?

- How do the characters present themselves? And what motivates them to do so?

- Is one character more self-assured or aggressive? Is so, why?

- How does the situation (or how can the situation) reflect a larger conflict within the story?

The events and the tone of the meeting will depend on what you are planning for the future of their relationship.

Example: ***Genesis Sequence***.
Skyra meets Ripple for the first time, 47,675 years in the past, establishing a relationship that lasts through the entire series. Skyra has never seen metal, or plastic, or any kind of technological device. She is not capable of understanding that Ripple can be anything other than a living creature. To her, animals are either prey to be killed for food, or they are predators to be feared. At their first meeting, Ripple pursues Skyra, hoping to make friends with her and learn more about Neanderthals. Skyra assumes the "creature" is a predator stalking her, and she flees. When Ripple eventually catches up, Skyra feels she has no choice but to attack. This leads to an interesting confrontation between two impossibly contrasting beings—rich with possibilities for action, and for mind-bending revelations (both for the characters and for the readers).

Example: ***Diffusion***
Quentin meets Samuel for the first time, establishing a relationship that lasts through the entire series. Samuel is a Victorian Englishman who does not age and has been living in the tropical wilderness with an unknown Papuan tribe for 150 years. Quentin is an American middle school teacher who has endured a devastating plane crash with his family and a group of students, and he is delirious from blood loss and fatigue. This meeting scene *has* to be dramatic and memorable. The characters want very different things!

Example: *from blog post by John J. Kelly* (link provided above)
An older woman's desire for friendship after the loss of her longtime companion drives her to pursue a relationship with a new couple in her apartment building, leading her to ignore clues that their motives may be less than noble. This relationship kicks off the main conflict of the story, therefore the first meeting must be well crafted and memorable. You could drop in subtle hints that show that the woman is vulnerable, as well as hints that show the couple might be deceitful.

These first meetings are your opportunity to get your readers invested in the characters and in the ultimate outcome of the story.

First meetings are always moments of mystery, and perhaps suspense, because the reader does not know what may come of the relationship. It could be love, or it could be destruction. It could be healing, or it could be new wounds. It could lead to an entirely different path in the characters' lives.

Think about the people you know who have changed your life. Think about how important that moment was when you first met. If you were writing the story of your life, does that moment deserve special attention?

What can we learn from the typical *meet cute*?

In film, television, and romantic novels, a common trope is the *meet cute*. This is the scene in which the couple meets for the first time, in which they often say "cute" things.

"Every rom-com hinges on the moment early on when the love interests first meet. What elevates successful ones, actor chemistry aside, is when the witty interplay reveals personality traits that will drive the action – and the emotional arc – for the remainder of the journey."

Even if you don't write rom-coms, we can all learn by studying these romantic first meetings, as it requires great skill to do it well.

Example: *When Harry Met Sally*
"Protagonist Sally Albright's nearly OCD approach to life encounters, clashes with, and ultimately complements Harry Burn's more pessimistic take, with both maturing to the point they can appreciate the love that has grown between them and commit to the relationship. In their initial meeting, Sally arrives for their 18-hour road trek from Chicago to New York City, maps and schedule in hand, only to find Harry deep in embrace with his latest girlfriend, content to linger and disrupt her carefully constructed plans. Cuteness ensues as she nudges him to pay heed to her schedule. The scene works because the personalities and stakes are seeded with an economy of words, setting the stage for a delightful exploration of how people worlds apart in philosophy and outlook can still bond, building a durable foundation for a lasting love."

This first encounter is so memorable and important that it literally became the film's title!

Of course, the relationships in your stories may not lead to a happily ever after, but the concept is the same even if you are writing a horror novel. Maybe instead of a *meet cute*, your scene is a *meet mean*!

Here is a masterfully-brief first encounter, found in Mary Helen Specht's *Migratory Animals*.

Specht introduces the novel's main characters: Flannery, a white American woman in her 20s visiting Nigeria, and Kunle, a Nigerian man in graduate school.

"She met Kunle at an outdoor canteen at the Nigerian university where she had been posted on what was supposed to be a brief data-collecting trip. Sitting at an adjacent table with a soda and a worn textbook, he leaned over and said, "You should try the palm wine." Kunle wore slacks and a blue button-down Oxford, both ironed within an inch of their lives. Trim and preppy, he looked like one of those idealized husbands in films, usually too straight-laced to be Flannery's type, the kind of man who kissed a beautiful wife before leaving for the office."

This is an awesome example of *economy of words*. In this brief paragraph, Specht includes the following elements:

1. When and where she met the man
2. The initial encounter boiled down to a single spoken phrase and action
3. What the man was wearing
4. What his appearance reminds her of

Hmm… perhaps this list could be a used as a template for all our first-meeting scenes?

The most IMPORTANT takeaway for this topic:

The first meeting between your characters is critically important to the effectiveness of the story. In order to write an effective first meeting, you need to know your characters inside and out. Because I wrote Genesis Sequence after I had written the entire four-book series, I found it easier to write the first-meeting scene.

You might consider writing the first-meeting scene *after* you have written the rest of the story, so that you know your characters well, and so that you know all the details of your story.

Or… at the very least, come back to the first-meeting scene *after* you finish the story and give it a critical look. Tweak it to better match the aspects of the characters (and the story) you have learned throughout the writing process.

A key point to keep in mind:

Your first-meeting scene represents a *transition*, between what these people have been and how their lives are about to be changed.

Their world is about to change from this encounter.