

A real workshop example

I thought it would help if I shared a section from the book I'm editing and then gave the feedback I received at a recent workshop.

Context for the extract

This is a young adult crossover dystopian sci-fi, set in the New Zealand of the future. The icebergs have melted and much of low lying civilisation was buried beneath the waves centuries before. Kai is seventeen, training to be a diver so that she can explore the world of the Ancestors under the sea. In this extract she has gone on a dive by herself. Feedback received from the group are in green.

Kai decided to swim east from the cave and as she neared it she could see the remnants of huge stone docks and the old ship lying on its side, it's metal hull twisted and broken. The docks had been made of huge blocks of roughly-hewn stone and they had largely survived, though were now covered with vegetation and coral.

(Really like the description in this paragraph, it's very vivid.)

A shadow fell near Kai and someone, she could not see who, (the wording here is a bit clumsy) swam towards her from above. She kicked swiftly and ducked beside a wall that was covered in coral as it afforded decent cover. She was thankful that her diving outfit helped camouflage her as she must not be found where she had not yet been cleared to dive. (Again – wording seems clumsy. Can you show rather than tell that she isn't allowed to dive in this place yet?)

For a moment she thought the diver was coming her way and she searched desperately for some other cover, but there was none, so she pulled herself closer to the wall, lying low and still and hoped that they would not see her. Thankfully, after a few moments, the ripples in the water informed her that whoever was there was moving away from her, and towards the sacred site. (Does this paragraph add anything to the tension or the story? We only have a moment to feel scared for Kai and then everything is alright!)

This was profoundly shocking to Kai, even though she was diving where she shouldn't, reverence for the sacred site was instilled so deeply into divers that they couldn't conceive of going there except at summer solstice, a ceremony that Kai had not yet been allowed to attend. (You could show this by putting in an earlier scene either of the ceremony or someone else talking about it. It could be much more impactful if you set this up earlier and then we would be with Kai when she is shocked that someone would come here as we would already know it's taboo). The experienced divers were led by the elder diver once a year for a ceremony that was kept private to those who attended. The penalty for going there alone was exile and although Kai sometimes dreamed of peace and solitude, the thought of permanent exile, living alone and unprotected was not attractive. (This is good because you are setting things up for when Kai is exiled, though for a very different reason).

Curiosity rose inside Kai and without thinking she trailed the other diver cautiously, swimming low and close to the sea bed. Every living thing in the ocean knew that you are most visible to predators when they are below you and you are outlined in sharp relief against the light surface of the water. (This really helps us enter Kai's world. She knows this, and the other diver's know it, but we, as readers, don't). Thankfully Kai had prepared for a long dive and had stored glow worms in her gourd so she could breathe from it if needed. (I know that finding oxygen-bearing glow worms was key for the earlier version of this novel, but you've more or less deleted the scenes that relate this – what would happen if you completely cut out the glow worms and had Kai good at diving to the deeps because she had practised and honed her skills – like free divers today?)

The long gleaming path to the circle of standing stones was seaweed and coral free. Each of the stones was roughly hewn in dark grey rock and at the centre of the circle was a stone altar. There was limited cover on the pathway leading to the altar and Kai hoped that whoever was there was too focused on what they were doing to look behind them. (Do you need this sentence?) When she was close enough she swam behind a tall curved stone and watched the diver reach the altar and appear to remove something from the centre of it. Kai knew immediately what they had taken - it could only

be the sacred black pearls that were given as an offering to the sea each year and immeasurably valuable. The water was frustratingly murky and she couldn't identify the diver. (could you combine this with the other scene where she is diving? This is a lot of diving detail for a really quick bit of action at the end – if you had her meeting Maya earlier and then going on to see the diver at the sacred site it would move the story on more quickly.)

Kai realised she was low on air, and frustrated that she couldn't linger to see who it was, she swam down to the edge of the path trying to stay out of sight. Kai reached the end of the path and swam swiftly back to the cave, and back to the hot sunlit world above. (This last phrase is great)

Additional notes: Kai and Maya as names – could you change one so they are more distinctive? The first syllable rhymes with each and that makes it easy to muddle who is who as you are reading.