

Pacing

Keeping The Action Going

First Rule

- THERE ARE NO RULES
- Writing is subjective
 - You may hate a book I love, you may love a book I can't stand
 - That's okay
- Everybody has a different writing style and method
- But when you're doing something that many others caution against doing, be sure you know why
 - Make sure it's for the right reasons
- Take all pronouncements you hear in a writing seminar with a grain of salt
 - "You must outline" vs. "You must never outline"
 - Think about them critically and decide whether the guidance works for you

Storytelling

- Think about how you tell a story verbally to someone you know
 - Imagine the reader yawning, rolling their eyes, looking at their watch
 - Anything that would make you do those things, leave it out
- Elmore Leonard: “Try to leave out the parts that readers tend to skip.”
- Exclamation points are not necessary unless a character is shouting
- Everything in the book should advance the plot
 - By knowing where you are
 - By knowing who the characters are
 - By conjuring mystery about what will happen next

What does “Fast-paced” Mean?

- It’s about rhythm and momentum
- A thriller should be like a roller coaster
 - Build-up of suspense going up the first hill
 - The release and exhilaration of the fall
 - In a novel, the biggest hill should be at the end of the ride
- Give breathing room after an action scene
 - Allow the reader to build up adrenaline stores for the next action scene
- Vary the sentence structure depending on the type of scene
 - Shorter sentences and paragraphs speed up the pace
 - Long descriptions will seem inappropriate in a gun fight

In Media Res

- Start the story already in progress
 - Begin by presenting a scenario that invites questions from the reader
 - Don't begin with back story, character description, weather, or scene setting
 - Dreams or waking up in bed are cliché
 - Explain things later
 - Prologue is fine as long as it directly affects the story that follows
- Kurt Vonnegut: “Start as close to the end as possible”

Suspense

- Setting the rules
 - The reader should understand what's at stake, who the players are, and what the consequences of the action will be
 - Suspense results from the reader understanding the situation and caring about what happens to the characters
- Alfred Hitchcock's theory of suspense
 - Surprise is when a bomb blows up in a restaurant
 - Suspense is knowing the ticking bomb is under the table when the characters sit down for dinner
- Seed your resolutions from the beginning
 - If your character offs the villain with a drill, don't introduce it in the paragraph before
 - Find a place in the book with enough distance so that the reader forgets about it, but still thinks it's clever when it's ultimately used

Coincidence

- Coincidence can kick off a story
 - Believability is the key
- Don't use coincidence to makes things better for the protagonist
 - It's a cheat, and readers will call you on it
 - If the gunman's shot goes awry because the sun got in his eyes, it can't be because the clouds suddenly parted; but it *is* okay if the protagonist used a hidden mirror to shine the sun in his eyes
- Coincidence can make things worse for the protagonist
 - Just don't overuse it

Cliffhangers

- Avoid direct foreshadowing
 - “Little did he know, but he had less than five minutes to live”
 - Be subtle
 - Use only info the character would know
- Pose a new question to the reader
 - Doesn't have to be life or death
 - Should pertain to plot or character, preferably both
- Don't save a character's life at the end of a chapter
 - Unless it unveils a new mystery or plot problem
 - And don't save the life in the first sentence of the next chapter
- Try to end chapters on a strong note, particularly the last sentence or even last word

Enter Late, Leave Early

- The “Law and Order” technique
- Avoid showing mundane activities
 - Opening doors, driving directions, etc.
 - Just enough to make the reader understand what’s happening
 - Unless it’s germane to the plot
- Skip traveling scenes
 - Have characters teleport to the next place
 - Unless exposition or crucial events happen during the travel
- Skip all the stuff we know happens
 - Sleeping, eating, bathroom breaks, and any other normal routine
- Flash forward to the next part of the story that’s important
 - Summarize anything pertinent that happens in between

Research

- Only include 10% of the research you do
- Don't info-dump
 - Dole it out a little at a time
- Don't have a character explaining something another character should already know
 - “As you know, Dr. Tindale, the liver produces enzymes critical to...”
 - Include a character who's new to the situation or isn't a subject matter expert
- Long exposition and paragraphs slow stories to a crawl
- Learning things is fun for readers, but balance it with story

Dialogue

- White space makes for a fast read
- Use dialogue tags sparingly
 - But don't confuse the reader about who is talking
 - Try to create the characters such that you could tell who is speaking just by their style, grammar, and syntax
- Avoid spelling out a drawl or patois
 - Usually it's confusing or distracting
 - Can be conveyed by word choices
- Avoid dialogue tags other than "said"
 - And leave out adverbs modifying "said"
 - Avoid monologue-ing

Stakes

- Give the protagonist a high personal stake in the outcome
- Life or death stakes are reliably gripping
 - But the reader has to care about the people who live or die
- The stakes should get progressively higher as the novel develops
 - Two steps forward, one step back
 - Apply frustration and conflict
 - They're not fun in real life, but they're essential in storytelling

Obstacles

- Make it unlikely for your protagonist to survive or win
 - Overwhelming odds against achieving goals
 - The protagonist's flaws impede progress
- Make your villain better than your protagonist in some ways
 - But give your villain flaws, some of which he may not even think are flaws
- Don't make the obstacles occur by random chance
- Use obstacles to raise the stakes

The Ticking Clock

- Add a ticking clock, then shorten it
- Countdowns can be extremely tense
- Remind the reader of the timeline on a regular basis
 - But don't hammer it; work it in naturally
- Orient the reader in time
 - Can be difficult in international thrillers with characters in multiple time zones
- Keep track of the time
- Make sure there's enough time for the events and action

Action Scenes

- Don't pause in the middle of the action
 - If someone's shooting at you, you don't think back to your childhood, you're trying to figure out how not to die
 - Details, however, can seem more pronounced or intense
 - Memories of intense or traumatic events can be triggered by odors, so don't forget the sense of smell, in addition to sight, sound, feel, even taste (the bile at the back of your throat or the gunpowder residue landing on your tongue)
- Make the action plausible
- Describe the setting beforehand so that the reader doesn't get lost
- For God's sake, get the gun info right

Flashbacks and Dreams

- Use with caution
- Like prologues, they should be directly linked to the story
- Keep them short
- If you use dreams to foreshadow, don't be heavy handed with them
 - Don't start a novel with a dream; it deceives the reader, who won't trust you after that (Inception is a good example of an exception done well)

Switching Points of View

- When writing in third person multi-POV, change POV from chapter to chapter
- Works especially well when there are two related but separate plot threads going simultaneously
- But don't switch within a scene
 - Called “head-hopping”
 - Can be confusing to a reader
- Try to limit POVs to only three or four main characters
 - You can add in minor characters' POV, but do it sparingly

The Payoff

- Don't rush it
 - This is what readers have spent 400 pages waiting to see
- No deus ex machina
 - The protagonist cannot be rescued
 - The protagonist has to use resourcefulness, skill, stamina, or willpower to defeat the enemy
- Make the villain get an appropriate comeuppance
- Answer all the big questions and resolve all plot threads
- Leave the reader wanting more