

Pacing Dialogue and Action Scenes – Your Story at Your Speed

By Holly Lisle

What is pacing?

Pacing is moving your story forward smoothly, at your speed. Not everyone wants a breakneck race through the pages; not everyone wants a bucolic amble, either. The goal of this workshop is to help you take control of your writing pace – to make your story travel at the pace you want, so that you can tell the story you want to tell.

Here are some techniques I've learned for controlling the pace of my stories.

To Speed Up Action Scenes:

Limit extraneous information.

This is not the time to describe the countryside, the weather, or what people are wearing. Concentrate on the main characters, their movements, their five senses, and their emotions as they work through whatever problem they're facing.

Pull your camera in close.

Let us taste the blood at the corner of the lip, feel the pain of the broken bone, hear the whistling of the blade, smell sweat, see eyes wide with shock, the beads of sweat on upper lips. Sense details create a sense of immediacy and urgency, and make a scene feel faster.

Keep sentences short and clean.

There are times and places for the hundred word sentence, but the fast-paced action scene is not one of them.

Be sharp, short, hard-edged.

Use fragments (sparingly). Kill adjectives and adverbs – be ruthless. You don't need many, and may not need any. Find good verbs and nouns, and let the scene run with them.

Examples of action scenes that play well quickly:

- Fight scenes
- Chase scenes
- Critical moments in your plot

To Slow Down Action Scenes:

Offer setting details.

Now you can take a bit of time with descriptive passages, narrative notes on culture, history or character background, local color, costuming, terrain details, and even the weather. Caution: To slow a scene to the point of inducing coma, add a lot of these.

Move the camera out.

Give us the panoramic view of the characters, their surroundings and their actions from either distant third person or omniscient viewpoint. We don't need to be inside their heads all the time, and being outside of their heads slows down the perceived pace of the scene a bit.

Give yourself a bit more room on sentence length.

If you want to experiment with the hundred-word sentence, you can do it here. Don't go overboard; your objective is still to tell a story and move the action forward. But you do have significant leeway in the slower scene. Moderate (stress MODERATE) use of adverbs and adjectives. Instead of none, you can scatter a few throughout the scene. This stuff is like fennel, though – a tiny pinch of adjective or adverb goes a long, long way.

Scenes that do well with a slower pace:

- Middle scenes
- Romantic scenes
- Developmental moments in the plot

Scene Practice:

Remember that any scene can be written with either a fast or slow pace – and either can work, depending on how it fits with the rest of your manuscript.

To get comfortable with looking at pace as something you control (instead of as something that controls you), you're going to write the same action scene two ways – first paced as quickly as you can, and then as slowly. If you have a scene in mind that you would like to try this with, use that. If you don't have any ideas, then you can write about either a fight between two people, or one character trying to get away from another character.

To accelerate a dialogue scene:

Get to the point.

Start in the middle of the conversation, with the first thing that a character says being directly related to the problem of the scene. Don't worry about describing how the characters meet up, or how they greet each other, or giving us their conversation before they get to the point. Be direct.

The conversation starts not with:

"Hi, Bill."

"Oh, hey, Fred. Good to see you today. Gorgeous weather, isn't it?"

But with:

"I couldn't believe it when I heard that Keith Cavernaugh got murdered last night."

Fred almost dropped his rake. "I hadn't heard," he said.

Avoid most description.

Don't spend a great deal of time telling us what the characters are doing while they're talking. A bit of this is necessary; otherwise you end up with two heads speaking into a void. But limit brutally. If someone is talking while hand-tooling a saddle, we don't need to know at that time the details of the leather design.

Allow characters to talk at cross-purposes.

Good listeners are nice in real life, but people who interrupt each other and don't listen because each is talking about what they think is most important get a lot of information on the page in a short space, and draw the reader in.

Example:

“So then they found the murder weapon under the kitchen sink, but no one is talking about whether there were prints on it or not –”

“– Uh-huh. Anyway, Fred stood me up for our date, and then he had the nerve to show up three hours late with these droopy, sorry excuses for flowers and some lame excuse about his car breaking down.”

Lisa sighed. “– So the police took his wife in for questioning this morning, and you have to think about her and those three sweet little children there in the house with him when it happened –”

“Who cares, Lisa? I’m telling you that Fred’s a jerk, and you’re telling about people I don’t even know.”

“We both already knew Fred was a jerk. The guy who was murdered lives right around the corner from you.”

End the dialogue the instant you’ve achieved your objective.

If you wanted the conversation to throw doubt on the motives of one of the two speakers, bail out of it the instant the first speaker becomes suspicious of the second. Don’t waste time getting them out of the conversation. Just cut to the next scene.

To slow down dialogue scenes:

Have characters meander and wander from point to point.

This especially works well in comic dialogue, and is something

Mark Twain did especially well. Imagine conversations you have had with people who stopped and started, forgot what they wanted to say, remembered extraneous details that to them suddenly seemed like something they just had to let you in on.

Warning: A little of this goes a long way. Keep these meanderings pruned down unless you **want** your readers to want to murder the speaker.

Here's a link to The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, which is an excellent example of what I'm talking about.

Use more description of what characters are doing, where they are, and so on.

Instead of:

"I'm not ready to get involved in a murder."

"Then get ready, because you're already involved."

Write:

"I'm not ready to get involved in a murder." Louise wouldn't meet her sister's eye. Instead she stood there in the kitchen with her back pressed up against the sink, and with the sun pouring in through the window catching the fly-away hairs that had escaped her ponytail, and polished the silver teapot that their mother had left her. The backlighting from the window made her look like some sort of middle-aged angel.

Carolyn refused to be evaded. "Then get ready," she said, "because you're already involved."

Let your characters be good listeners.

But not for too long. Having one person conveying information

while the other person sits there supportively, adding little murmurs of understanding and appreciation, may be great in real life. But it's amazing boring to read about.

Go past your main point in concluding the dialogue.

Let the characters wander into other topics to hide the important information that you've conveyed – this works well for planting red herrings in mysteries and in making important story points subtle instead of emphasized. It's a great way to play fair and still sneak up on your reader with a surprise or two.

Dialogue Practice

Do two versions of a dialogue between two people, one of whom is holding information of life-or-death import. In the first version, get the information across quickly and with emphasis – make it exciting.

In the second version, hide the information in the middle of the dialogue, and make either the speaker not aware that he's let this info slip, or the listener not catch on to the import of what he's heard.

To write professionally, you must learn to make your dialogue feel real to your reader, while making sure it's carrying the information you need to present in ways your reader won't recognize as presentation.

This takes practice. To get the hang of it, write dialogue as your warm up every day—ten minutes doing one type of dialogue, between any characters, for any story, or just about two strangers. Set your timer, write steadily.

You'll get there.

NOTE: I offer a comprehensive introductory class based on my fiction-writing and publishing experience. It's called How to Write Flash Fiction that Doesn't SUCK, and it is no-strings-attached FREE, including a private classroom, downloadable lessons, and a friendly, well-moderated forum where you can work with other students. I hope you'll try it out.

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