

ELEMENTS *of* FICTION WRITING



**BEGINNINGS,
MIDDLES & ENDS**

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FROM NANCY KRESS

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PACE YOURSELF

If you're writing a thriller, mystery, Western or adventure-driven book, you'd better keep things moving rapidly for the reader. Quick pacing is vital in certain genres. It hooks readers, creates tension, deepens the drama, and speeds things along.

If you're a writer (or an hourly worker or dancer), you've probably heard the phrase "pick up the pace" many times. But how do you do that? And why should you?

Let's start with a definition. For writers, pace is the speed at which events unfold and characters are introduced. It can be expressed as a ratio: the number of story events divided by the page count. The higher the ratio, the faster the pace.

PACE AND GENRE

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Writing fast-paced fiction isn't for everyone. So the first question is: What kind of book are you writing? If it's one of the aforementioned genres, you should plan on keeping the story moving briskly.

For instance, all of the following events occur in the first seventeen pages of James Patterson's best-selling thriller *Cradle and All*: two immaculate conceptions, a polio-like plague, a murder, an attempted abortion, the hiring of a private investigator, and the dispatching of a papal envoy from Vatican City. This varied action takes place in three countries among at least two dozen characters. Now that's a high pace ratio.

The advantage of this is that it raises many questions in the reader's mind, so he pushes on to seek answers, interested in the connection among these events and their possible outcomes. And if one question doesn't intrigue him, another will.

If you're writing women's fiction, character-driven science fiction or a historical novel, you can take more time to develop scenes and introduce events. With literary fiction, you can go slower still.

The slower pace, however, requires that your style be more polished and your characters more complex. Pace, like everything else in writing, involves a trade-off. If you're not offering the reader a lot of action to keep her interested, you must offer something else in its stead.

Slow pace is ideal for complex character development, detailed description, and nuances of style. In contrast to *Cradle and All*, consider the first seventeen pages of Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1995. The only "event" is that Mercy Goodwill, while preparing a pudding for supper, experiences an attack of what she thinks is indigestion. Shields uses this time to set up her story—and she's in no hurry about it. The advantage here is that the reader can form a deep interest and concern for each developed event and character.

TENSION

Picking up the pace increases tension in two ways. First, when events happen more quickly, you can more quickly get your characters into trouble. Conflict drives fiction; no one wants to read a four-hundred-page novel in which everything rolls along smoothly. Conflict also creates and sustains tension. Characters under stress are usually searching for ways out.

For instance, the first fifteen pages of Tess Gerritsen's mystery novel *The Apprentice* include four deaths, three of which are murders, at three separate locations. Even for a mystery, that's a lot of homicide crammed into a low word count. Here, the quick pace allows for a rapid increase in tension through the rapid increase in problems faced by the main character. Gerritsen's protagonist, Jane Rizzoli of the Boston Police Department, is forced to experience several kinds of tension at once:

- At the first death, which is especially grisly, she's afraid of looking weak in front of her fellow detectives—all male.
- The second two murders appear to have the same *modus operandi* as a serial killer that Jane put away once before, awakening terrible memories.
- Then there's a death threat that Jane isn't aware of—but we are. And she's the target.

The second way that a quick pace increases tension is that it sets opposing scenes close enough so that readers can draw unstated connections between them, even when characters don't.

Suppose, for instance, that your protagonist is a girl whose mother has just died. An uncle she's never met before attends the funeral and they converse briefly. He's sympathetic but reserved. After a few scenes concerning the girl's school life, the uncle reappears—not sympathetic to her at all, but instead brusque and even abusive.

If one hundred pages had passed between the uncle's first and second appearances, we might have remembered his name (maybe) but probably not much else, because both brevity and reserve marked his initial arrival. But a quick pace means that this encounter was not one hundred pages ago, but only twenty. It's still fresh in our minds, enabling us to ask, "What made him change so much toward her?" Now the uncle isn't just another minor character—he's a problem for the reader (if not yet for the girl), and problems increase tension.

BREVITY AND SPEED

So how do you quicken the pace of your story? Here are some suggestions:

- Start your story in the middle of a dramatic action, not before the drama commences.
- Keep description brief. This doesn't mean using no description, but rather choosing one or two telling, brief details and letting the reader's imagination fill in the rest.

- Combine scenes. If one scene deepens character by showing a couple at dinner and a few scenes later they have a fight, let them have the fight at dinner. Better yet, have them fighting at dinner and then have a cop burst in to arrest the wife.
- Rely on dialogue. A lot of story can be carried by spoken conversation. Readers seldom skip dialogue, especially brief exchanges, and it reads rapidly.
- Keep backstory to a minimum. The more we learn about your characters through what they do now, in story time, the less you'll need flashbacks, memories and exposition about their histories. All of these slow pace.
- Keep chapters short.
- Squeeze out every unnecessary word. This is the best way of all to increase pace because, as I noted before, pace is events divided by word count. If you consistently write "The sun set" rather than "The sun sank slowly in the bright western sky," your story will move three times as fast. Of course, there are times you want the longer version for atmosphere—but not many. Wordiness not only kills pace; it bores readers.

Not all of these suggestions will work for every story. Again, it depends on your genre and individual preference. Faster isn't always better, but frequently it's more salable.

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