



Writing Action Scenes

DargonZine Summit 2002

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INTRODUCTION

“The measure of action is the sentiment from which it proceeds. The greatest action may easily be one of the most private circumstance.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

They wavered, broke, and fled back; and then charged again, broke and charged again; and each time, like the incoming sea, they halted at a higher point. Again trumpets rang, and a press of roaring men leaped forth. They held their great shields above them like a roof, while in their midst they bore two trunks of mighty trees. Behind them the orc-archers crowded, sending a hail of darts against the bowmen on the walls. They gained the gates. The trees, swung by strong arms, smote the timbers with a rending boom.

— “The Twin Towers” by J.R.R. Tolkien

Ask someone to name an example of action in writing and a scene similar to the one depicted in “The Twin Towers” is likely to be the reply. Action is synonymous with battle, motion and activity (Instant Synonyms and Antonyms, 1970). Why else would there be a specific sub-genre of fiction entitled Action/Adventure?

What many writers fail to realize is that adjective form of action is more than its root “to act”. It’s a word that’s used to describe situations where the reader should get excited or caught up in the transpiring events. With that broad of a definition, you can see how action encompasses a lot more than broadswords and battlegear.

Action is really all about pacing. Action scenes can be love scenes (no pun intended) -- two characters that are madly in love and giving in to their primal desires. An action scene can be the departure of a train from a station as the hero tries to get on board. These kinds of action are not usually prominent in most author’s minds. Many authors write what should be action scenes without being truly aware of what they’re doing: inspiring an adrenaline rush that comes from the author insinuating that there is not enough time to think. Events are happening too quickly for the main character to process.

To better examine action’s role in pacing, let’s discuss how time is handled in stories. Will Greenway, author of “Reality’s Plaything”, describes narrative storytelling as having eight distinct shades of time:

1. Expositive Time: no time passes as the author stops the action of the story to relate past events or lengthy descriptions of the setting.
2. Natural Time: a pacing of events not in-step with the actual ticking of a clock or beating of a heart, but presented in sequential order and not necessarily at even intervals. Humans typically perceive time this way.
3. Compressed Time: compressed time is when the author wants to skip over a number of non-essential or non-significant events but does not break up the narrative into separate scenes. Something like: “John jogged through the woods determinedly; the sun was just rising over the mountains as he emerged from the last stand of trees.”
4. Dilated Time: an intentional slowing down of the pace so that impossible details are noticed -- perhaps the expression on a villain’s face just before an arrow is embedded in his throat or the color of a ring as a fist swipes across a hero’s face.

5. Accelerated Time: a staccato rhythm of events that impart a sense of urgency and rapidity to the reader.
6. Parallax or “Fugue” Time: a time when the continuity of events shifts to one or more viewpoints and a sense of the surreal is evident. Dreams are often good examples of fugue time.
7. Synthetic Time: a technique to impart a sense of unreliability in the viewpoint character but in situations where the writer wants the reader to know that time is passing; illustrated by characters who are fading in and out of consciousness.
8. Transitory or “Gated” Time: Chapter breaks or viewpoint shifts are examples of “gated” time. One scene ends and another begins. The reader knows time has passed simply because the break is so evident.

While a number of these “shades” of time can be combined to form an action scene, the most widely used are accelerated time (obviously) and dilated time (perhaps not so obviously). The reason why dilated time often appears in action scenes is because readers cannot stay “breathless” in an action scene for too long before they simply grow tired of it. It’s very similar to movies or television shows in that respect. If non-stop is the norm, the reader’s eyes will eventually begin to glaze over and the details of the scene will be lost. The reader will simply skim until the pace slows down enough and he or she can follow more easily.

That night Orem did not sleep long. He awoke disturbed and on the cot, not in the mahogany room. In his dream the pickled head of the wizard’s wife had called to him, and so he went to her, because he could not deny her.

There was a faint light in the library. It came from the green luminescent slime on the barrels. He sat on a pile of rubbish in the cluttered, unmagical room. He watched.

It was the barrel that held the wizard’s wife that shuddered first; then the others, as if the bodies inside were having silent convulsions, rocking the kegs, sloshing the water. Then a lid popped up loudly; another split in half; the third was sucked down into the barrel, and the water seeped and flowed over the top of it as it was drawn down.

In the dream there had been no danger, but Orem was afraid. Things that were dead ought to keep still, everyone knew that. But when the dead call, only a fool refuses them. And so he stayed and watched as a hand reached up from one, from two, from all of the barrels, long-fingered hands, with green light dripping slow as caterpillars down to the wrists, into the water.

“Don’t hurt me,” Orem whispered.

Abruptly the hands all thrust out toward him. He gasped, reached out with his power of negation to try to stop them; but this was not magic, not the blood-bought magic that a Sink could swallow up. The hands were undisturbed by his strongest effort. They reached over the barrels’ lip, and a single finger of each began to write in the slime. Orem could read the dark lines in the green shining, each woman writing her word, each trembling as if an uncontrollable power controlled them.

“Sister,” wrote the wife.

“God,” wrote the dark daughter.

“Horn,” wrote the light daughter.

Then faster, as the hands grew more sure:

“Sister Slut You Must See.”

“God Slave You Must Serve.”

“Horn Stone You Must Save.”

Then the hands shook violently, flew up in the air and splashed down again, then reached out, but kept getting sucked back in, as if they were struggling to write more, or even to leave the barrels entirely, and something fought as hard to keep them. The will to write was stronger: the fingers traced in barely readable letters words that only meant together:

“Let Me Die.” — “Hart’s Hope” by Orson Scott Card

Note in the scene above how Card constantly changes the flow of his description. He introduces the scene with a slow and eerie tone, then proceeds to explode into the violent message of the wizard’s barrels. He is constantly changing tone to manipulate the feelings of the reader. But he only keeps up the fast paced action for moments at a time -- enough to get the reader’s heart beating faster before lengthening out the time to include significant details such as the dripping of green light like “caterpillars” crawling down the arms.

Action is not just about fight scenes. It’s about gripping the reader and shaking him or her out of a seat.

THE MECHANICS OF ACTION SCENES

“Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.” — William Shakespeare

Holly Lisle, author and webmaster, lists the following tips to speed up action scenes on her website (<http://hollylisle.com>) :

Limit extraneous information: concentrate on main characters, their movements, five senses, and emotions as they face their problem.

Pull your camera in close: taste the blood at the corner of a character’s lip; feel the pain of a broken bone; hear the whistling of a blade. Sense details create a sense of immediacy and urgency.

Keep sentences short and clean: fast-paced action scenes are not the time or place for hundred-word sentences.

Be sharp, short, hard-edged: use fragments (although sparingly); kill adjectives and adverbs and focus on good verbs and nouns and let the scene run with them.

Fast action scenes are best suited for fight scenes, chases, and critical moments in the plot of

a story. Conversely, to slow down an action scene, follow these tips:

Offer setting details: take a bit of time with descriptive passages and narrative notes on culture, history, or character background. Perhaps even talk about the weather.

Move the camera out: give a panoramic view of characters, surroundings, and actions from a distant third person or omniscient viewpoint.

Give yourself room on sentence length: this is the time to experiment with the hundred-word sentence and utilize moderate use of adjectives and adverbs.

Scenes that work better with a slower pace are middle scenes in a story, highly romantic scenes, and developmental moments in the plot of a story.

OBSERVING ACTION SCENES

“Make the expectations lively enough, and action will follow.” — Mason Cooley

While reading other authors’ action scenes can be helpful in learning about pacing and impact, there’s another medium to be tapped when practicing action scene writing: movies. Martial arts films are a great source of inspiration for action scenes and are much more concrete to a budding author. Remember that all movies start from a screenplay. It’s up to the director and his or her team of cinematographers, composers, and lighting assistants to add the fine details that an author uses with an adjective, sentence fragment, or run-on sentence.

At some point watch a Bruce Lee film with a pad of paper and a pen. As the camera cuts to a different shot, make quick notes as to what’s happening. For example:

Close up shot: hero scrunches face into a grimace and shouts

Panoramic view: villains fall back in terror and scramble as dust billows from the center of the arena, followed by men falling under a flail of legs and arms.

CONCLUSION

“Never confuse movement with action.” — Ernest Hemingway

Hopefully this article has provided tips that authors can use to write stirring and effective action scenes. As stated previously, action scenes are much more than battle scenes -- they’re scenes that intend to blow up issues and get the reader’s heart thumping. That can fit into any number of situations -- not just battles.

Below are other examples of action scenes culled from some of my favorite books.

They had gone three steps when Joanna heard it, and her heart caught and twisted within her. Shocking in the alien night, Gary’s voice had a frantic note to it that would have brought her up short but for the insistent drag of that powerful hand on her wrist. “Joanna! *Joanna!*”

There was some kind of commotion below—she heard Caris’ voice cry “*No!*” and the scuffling crash of something falling. Antryg halted short, forcing her to stop, as two men in the black uniforms of sasenna raced past the foot of the

stairs. A second later, she heard the crashing of their feet in the garden outside; already Antryg was dragging her down the stairs, and she was stumbling to keep up with his long stride.

In the ransacked library, Caris was struggling wildly against his bonds, desperation and fury in his face. “Grandfather’s out there!” he shouted, as Antryg scooped one of the daggers from the table. “I have to ... !”

“It’s a Crier.” Red light slipped along the blade as the wizard slashed the bonds; he caught Caris by his torn jacket and sword belt as the young man lunged for the garden doors. “An illusion of summoning—Come on!”

— From “The Silent Tower” by Barbara Hambly

Orem looked upward, and the Hart slowly bowed its head. The weight of the horns was too much for any neck to bear, but the neck bore. The Hart set its hind legs and braced backward, and the head sank until the horns danced directly in front of Orem’s face, until one single horntip rested still as a mountain right where he could not look at anything else. And he looked, and looked again, and looked deeper, and saw:

That the stars of a tiny heaven danced around the horn. That he was falling down into the stars, then past them, and the tip of the horn loomed great as a moon, great as all the world. The it *was* the world, and Orem could not breathe as he raced down and down until suddenly all held still and he hung gasping in the air over the city of Inwit.

The city teemed with life below him; boats docked and undocked at the wharves; the guard marched here and there like ants upon the city walls. But it was not the life of the city that gave it the look of constant motion. For even as Orem watched the city was unbuilding itself, as if time had come undone and it was century, two centuries in the past. Roads changed their path; buildings grew new and flashed as brief skeletons of frames and then were replaced by older, smaller buildings. There were more and more farms within the city walls, and the settlements outside shrank and nearly disappeared. Suddenly the Great Temple was gone, and the Little Temple changed so there were not seven circles over every column, and the Little Temple, too, was gone, and the city bent a different way. King’s Street twisted sharp to the west, and the great gate of the city was Hind’s Trace, West Gate, the Hole.

— from “Hart’s Hope” by Orson Scott Card.