

Techniques to Establish Pacing

By **Gerry Visco**

Pacing, as it applies to fiction, could be described as the manipulation of time. Though pacing is often overlooked and misunderstood by beginning writers, it is one of the key craft elements a writer must master to produce good fiction. Best-selling author Elmore Leonard recommends simply 'cutting out everything, but the good parts.' While this is interesting advice, the following article covers the matter of pacing in a bit more detail.

The elements of time delineated in your story or screenplay include the time of day or period; scene versus summary; flashback; and foreshadowing. Elements of time raise the following questions:

- 1) When is the story being told as compared to when the events of the story took place?
- 2) Is there a distance in terms of time?
- 3) Does the story begin with the birth of the protagonist and end with the death? or Is the time more limited?
- 4) What narrative strategies should you use to convey the sense of time passing or the distance of the narration?

Scene is necessary to all fiction. You can't have a story without it. In order to have a crisis moment, for example, it has to be in a moment in time and, therefore, it cannot be summarized. A summary covers a longer period of time in a shorter passage. A scene covers a short period of time in a longer passage. What could take only a few seconds in real time might be covered in paragraphs, even pages, depending upon the writer and the event.

On the whole, one mistake you need to avoid is summarizing events. Instead, realize them in the moment. Sometimes, when you are writing a first draft, you might be tempted to put the moment into summary, but the scene is how you dramatize the action. The question is to try to balance the scenes and use the exposition gracefully. Most short stories have at least three scenes. A 'short' might only have one scene. A chapter could have three or four scenes, although it could just as easily have one.

The scene should probably have movement. Just as in a story you have conflict, crisis and resolution, a scene might have the same sort of shape. You should use scenes in one specific moment in time to show important behavior in your characters. Stretches of time or activities in the story that are secondary to the story's development should be expressed through a 'narrative bridge.' You use summary in the narrative. Now, that doesn't have to mean boring. For example, 'The Things They Carried,' an excellent short story by the writer Tim O'Brien, goes back and forth between summary and scene.

Here's an example of summary that is hardly dull:

'After the chopper took Lavender away, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross led his men into the village of Than Khe. They burned everything. They shot chickens and dogs, they trashed the village well, they called in artillery and watched the wreckage, then they marched for several

hours through the hot afternoon and then, at dusk, while Kiowa explained how Lavender died, Lieutenant Cross found himself trembling.'

Dialogue that is secondary can similarly be summarized by indirect discourse. So, if you find dialogue that expresses information that is fairly routine or not too interesting, you should summarize it. For example: 'Hi, John. How's it going? You feeling better?' 'I'm OK, thanks a lot,' said Mary.' Instead, just say, 'They exchanged greetings, and Mary confessed she felt OK.'

Arrange your pages on a large table and look at them like an artist would.: How many scenes do you have? Are there too few or too many? Do there seem to be any missing scenes? What about if you rearranged the sequence of events? Could you use the beginning of the ending scene to frame the story? Take the sheets of paper, and 'cut and paste' the sections that need moving

If there is a scene that you are having trouble with, especially one that provides a turning point in the story, focus in on that scene. Could it use action, not necessarily physical action, but movement, change? Try to expand the scene into three to five pages to give you a greater opportunity to explore the interpersonal dynamics. Think about dramatizing how the balance of power in the scene changes.

Setting incorporates place, but you also have to consider the time of the year, the time of day and how you reveal this information without being too obvious. This information is not always essential - - it depends upon the story in question. Basically, it is similar to an 'establishing shot' in a film. Just remember to be consistent and to make the timing logical. It might be boring to mention 'in the evening,' but you could use other words to show the time of day. However, don't skip the time element altogether since it adds veracity to the lives you are portraying. If a family is having breakfast, then we know the time of day. If a character is wearing mittens, this establishes the time of year.

Both flashback and foreshadowing are techniques that play with narrative time. It's possible they may be used to enrich the narrative, and you might add them during revision since they provide emphasis and balance.

A flashback is a narrative passage that takes us to the past of when the story is set. The flashback reveals something about the character that we didn't know before that explains things by showing not telling. You should use it when the character is going into a situation that varies from the behavior we have come to expect from him or her. However, you need to be sure that the flashback you have selected tells us something relevant to the story. There's nothing worse than slowing down the action with a flashback that doesn't contribute to the story.

Instead of flashback, you might use dialogue, narration or some detail to give the required information. Also, remember the power of inference. There may be more going on in the background of a character than you reveal in the actual prose. Be economical with your words. Imply what you can about the character or situation without being obvious.

Flashback reveals information at the right time, but it may not be part of the central action. Flashback is an effective technique to show the reader more about character and theme.

You might use a flashback if, in the present of the story, the character is unsympathetic and you want to provide another viewpoint. For example, think of Scrooge in 'A Christmas Carol,' where we get the examples demonstrated by the appearance of the Ghost of Christmas Past. We see Scrooge as a boy in flashback and feel sorry for him. The same thing happens with the character Anders in the wonderfully constructed story, 'Bullet in the Brain,' by Tobias Wolff. Anders is portrayed as especially unsympathetic. The story is told entirely in the present tense, except for a long flashback in expository prose that enumerates all the events in Anders' life that flashed through his brain as a bullet went through his head during a bank robbery. The passage begins by noting what Anders did NOT remember during this scene.

'He did not remember his first lover, Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before it came to irritate him -- her unembarrassed carnality, and especially the cordial way she had with his unit, which she called Mr. Mole, as in 'Uh-oh, looks like Mr. Mole wants to play,' and 'Let's hide Mr. Mole!' Anders did not remember his wife, whom he had also loved, before she exhausted him with her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen professor of economics at Dartmouth.' And it goes on for paragraphs. This information is expository, rather than in a scene, but it flashes back to Anders' past.

Some writers rely on flashback as a way of avoiding the central conflict of the story. Sometimes, it's easier for the writer to avoid the conflict altogether, since conflict produces anxiety -- fiction is trouble, after all, and we want to produce some tension and anxiety. You, too, may be able to re-order time and use flashback in your story, though you often have to wait until after you have a first draft. Sometimes an entire tale can be told in flashback with a frame (for example, think of the movie 'Sunset Boulevard,' and its dead narrator), or 'Heart of Darkness,' also a frame story (actually a novella). Sometimes the mechanics of the flashback technique can cause you to use cumbersome verb constructions. Keep this simple. If you are writing the story in the past tense, you can begin the flashback in past perfect. You can use 'had' plus the verb a couple of times. Then you can switch to the simple past. I gleaned this nugget from Janet Burroway in her helpful book on writing fiction. As she says, 'the reader will be with you.'

What is foreshadowing? It is not conflict, but the promise of conflict. One example would be the opening of Truman Capote's 'Children on Their Birthdays': 'Yesterday afternoon the six o'clock bus ran over Miss Bobbit.' Or the opening of Richard Yates' novel, 'The Easter Parade': 'Neither of the Grimes sisters would have a happy life, and looking back, it always seemed that the trouble began with their parents' divorce.' Both of these openings promise that things go from bad to worse. Or how about, 'The boy woke up, got dressed and slung a rifle over his shoulder as he ran out to the school bus.' We know that something's going to happen with the rifle, which raises a story question. If the story questions are strong, then your reader will stay interested in the narrative.

Foreshadowing can be used to get the reader through a dull section of a narrative. For example, you could create suspense by something that WILL happen: 'Susan had no idea when she paid her \$5 for the afternoon matinee that she had just made one of the biggest mistakes of her life. She would've been better off staying home that day.' We don't know what calamity is about to befall Susan, but we get the feeling she made a huge miscalculation, and we look forward to knowing what it was, the worse the better really, in terms of entertainment value.

Of course, you need to use this technique judiciously. You can employ the minor characters to foreshadow the actions of the major characters, for example. If you make a promise by foreshadowing, then make sure to fulfill the promise; otherwise, the reader will feel gyped.

With foreshadowing, it might be better to err on the obvious side because if your attempts are too subtle, there will be no shadows to see.