

Writing Tutorial #9 (April 2017)

Writing Action!

Constructing Exciting Scenes That Will Keep Your Readers

On The Edge of Their Seats

By Midnight

THE ART OF ACTION

Your novel is underway, you've developed a cast of intriguing characters, and have devised a plot that could captivate even the most jaded of readers. The crucial moment has finally arrived—your hero has his (or her) back against the wall. The only way out is for them to fight the shadowy assailants that block their path...

Action—it's the fuel that gives life to a story. Not *all* action need come from the barrel of a gun or the impact of a punch. In terms of writing, there are various iterations of what "action" can entail. A character sitting behind a computer hacking into a corporation's database can be written in such a way that it's an "action" scene. In a different instance, a character racing to the airport to prevent their long lost love from leaving the country could easily qualify as another example of action. But, let's not shortchange the more lurid variety either. Fist-flying brawls, explosive bullet-ballets, and general all-out mayhem have their place, not just in action/adventure stories, but in thrillers, noir mysteries, horror, science fiction, fantasy, and—in reality—*most* genres. Even some romance novels have characters engaging in confrontational spats of physical violence and rivalry.

A poorly written action sequence can shatter the pacing of your story, no matter how well every other aspect is constructed. For this tutorial, we'll focus on the "dos" and "don'ts" of writing exciting action sequences, along with looking at examples of effective scenes. Unlike previous tutorials, the tips and techniques here are geared more for writers interested in penning a novel or short story, as opposed to a movie screenplay or comic script.

Unlike a novel, an action scene in a screenplay is often brief and not described in great detail. But this isn't to say that you shouldn't make them exciting—just don't look to fill up pages of your script with dense walls of text depicting Jackie Chan style blow-by-blow choreography, or city-spanning car chases where every stomp of the gas pedal is described. Some screenwriters do offer more detail than others, but I've seen several produced scripts which simply opt for describing an action scene with the words "they fight." For most, that's a bit sparse, but I've also seen some scripts—all unproduced, if

that's any indication—with page after page (*after page...*) of details, outlining what the writer must have thought was *the* fight scene to end *all* fight scenes. As always, the less-is-more adage is often the rule to live by with screenplays.

THE MECHANICS OF MAYHEM

Well-written action scenes will have a reader speeding through your novel with excitement, eager to get to the next big adrenaline-pumping sequence. However, formulaic set-pieces and scenes that overstay their welcome can plunge your tale into predictability and dullness. This could, in turn, result in your readers skimming, or outright skipping, your action scenes.

But there are ways around this. Pacing, flow, and drama should remain in the forefront of a writer's mind, even when penning an action sequence. In a previous tutorial, we looked at the Lester Dent “Master Plot” formula, which stressed the importance of *every* scene pushing the story further along. Action should *never* be without either reward or consequence. The hero should always gain or lose something in each confrontation (ex. does the protagonist acquire the information or tool to overcome their next obstacle, or do they lose an ally or valuable treasure, which will further impede their goal?). An action scene shouldn't be shoehorned in, just for the sake of including some fisticuffs or gunplay. Make every event count for something in the greater scheme of the plot.

Also, think of ways to make the action *unique*. If the hero has one death-defying struggle aboard a subway train, it may be wise to change locations for the next go-round. Keep it fresh, while also trying to raise the stakes with each subsequent conflict.

Don't hesitate to reveal character through action. During one fight, maybe we see that a character *enjoys* the violence, or that they have a sadistic streak. Or we find out about a character's aversion to guns or knives over the course of a battle. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, we *don't* learn Indiana Jones hates snakes while he's having some fine wine and caviar—we find out when he's confronted by the slithering serpents during a perilous, and iconic, scene.

Also, consider briefly stopping the action to get inside a character's head. In the first *Danger Zone One* novel, I attempted this as Reena rushes in alone to stop the rampaging power suit:

Reena charged down the corridor. With each passing step, the voice grew louder. She reached a wall and pressed her back against it before peeking around the corner. Sure enough, there was Finkler, inside the power suit. He stood over Stayroff, who was still very much alive—though, judging by his soiled clothing and dirt-encrusted skin, he'd seen better days.

I made it in time! Reena thought to herself, relieved. But that relief was quickly replaced with a gnawing sense of trepidation. *What am I thinking? This isn't just crazy*

—*it's suicide!* She believed Madison was insane for wanting to track down the rampaging suit without backup but, now, she'd *topped* that level of insanity by following after it alone. At least Madison had experience and was skilled with a firearm, but Reena knew her limitations. *You can barely fire your gun!* Her partner's words returned to haunt her. This was her first day on the job, and it was shaping up to be her *last!*

Reena gulped. *Maybe...maybe I made a mistake becoming a—*she stopped, banishing the fleeting uncertainty from her mind. *No, Reena—you can't think like that! Madison pegged you for a quitter, but she's wrong! This is it, you can do this! You're a police officer now!*

She drew in a breath, grasped the Halvok 99's handle, exhaled, and lifted the firearm out of its holster. She fumbled with the weapon for a moment, trying to get a satisfactory grip on it. The last thing she needed was to reenact her embarrassing spectacle at the firing range and have the gun's recoil knock her to the floor.

Reena jumped into action before any second thoughts could inhibit her, spinning around the corner and aiming the Halvok at the power suit's back. "H-hold it right there! You're busted, pal!"

The scene manages to further the plot along, and we also get a sense of Reena's mindset. She's dedicated to being a police officer but, at the same time, has her self-doubt that she'll be able to actually *stop* the power suit. As a reader, we're placed in Reena's predicament as she prepares to make her next move.

ACTION IN MOTION

What follows are several effective examples of well-written action sequences. For these examples, I chose books that wouldn't be standard fare of one's preeminent literary club. In short, I stayed away from including the writings of big name authors or overtly well-known works. There's no harm in looking at the works of Stephen King or Tom Clancy to hone and inspire one's style, but strictly examining these 'masters' of their respective literary craft can also be an intimidating and somewhat inefficient approach. As such, I found examples from works *not* so widely acknowledged, but ones that provide *equally* valuable insight into how to construct an engaging action scene.

Often, movie novelizations aren't known for their quality, but there are notable exceptions. Joan D. Vinge's novelization of the 1985 film, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, is one such:

Max swore under his breath. Bearing down on him was the monster called Big Foot—a vehicle the size of a diesel truck and just as powerful, its front end reinforced with steel plates. Max floored the accelerator of his own car, but Big Foot surged forward, cresting over him like a tidal wave. Big Foot rammed Max's vehicle with brutal force; Max's head cracked against the back of the cockpit. He clung to the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands, trying to keep control as Big Foot shunted

him again.

Vinge doesn't bog down the reader with too much info. Take for example her description of the Big Foot vehicle. It's just enough detail to give us a visual image, without interrupting or sidetracking the action. We also get a sense of urgency from this passage. It's effective in simplicity, but also in its ability to flow with drama and tension.

In Kumo Kagyu's novel, *Goblin Slayer*, we follow our helmeted protagonist—the man known only as Goblin Slayer—during his adventures. During one of the early action sequences we see his merciless nature while battling an ogre:

The ogre went to speak—whether to beg for his life or to taunt them one last time, he himself didn't know. But his last words never made it out of his mouth. Goblin Slayer crushed the ogre's throat under his heel. The ogre gave a final voiceless gasp, looking vacantly up at the pitiless steel helmet.

“You are nowhere near as frightening...” Goblin Slayer raised his sword.

This was it. The end. The ogre saw cold eyes shining from the darkness inside that helm.

“...as the goblins I've faced.”

The ogre's consciousness was consumed with pain and humiliation, fear and despair; then it was submerged in darkness; then it was extinguished.

The above excerpt not only affords the reader an image of the protagonist's methods, but his brutal nature as well. The action isn't described in gory detail, and more emphasis is given on both characters' reactions.

Some novels adopt a more visceral atmosphere when relating moments of action. Take for example, *Army of Devils*, the eighth novel in the *Able Team* series:

A wide-eyed punk sprinted up the stairs, kalashnikov flashing.

Lyons fired two rounds point-blank into the punk's chest. Flesh exploded from the teenager's back as he slammed sideways into the stairwell. But he did not fall down.

Instead he saw Lyons and Blancanales and raised his AK as blood sprayed from lung wounds.

Lyons put the muzzle of his rifle under the punk's chin and fired. The blast tore away the side of the punk's head, but still he did not fall.

He lurched forward, aiming his gun, obviously not feeling the horrible wounds. At last a burst from Gadget's Uzi severed the brain from the spinal cord.

Gadgets stared at the dead youth, then pointed down the stairs to where more drug-mad punks lay in wait.

“I don't care what you say, Lyons. You can call an airstrike, call for tanks, call for Marines, but I'm not going down there!”

Here we have fast-paced action, coupled with over-the-top violence. It's one of the novel's climatic scenes as a gang of drug-addled youths descend upon our protagonists. *Able Team* was part of the '80s heyday of "action/adventure" novels partially inspired by the popular *Death Wish* and *Rambo* films. The style of prose might be too lurid for some, nor is the writing in the caliber of a Dean Koontz or Anne Rice novel. But, keep in mind, there's an audience for nearly *all* writing styles, including the gore and ultra-violence. Case in point, *Army of Devils* was #8 in the *Able Team* series—a series which lasted fifty-one novels, not including various spin-offs and anthologies.

Another '80s era action novel, *Phoenix: Dark Messiah*, shares in the more embellished sequences of carnage and mayhem:

His old combat reflexes taking over, Phoenix did a fast tuck-and-roll to get out of fire of a Ruger AC556K assault rifle drawing a bead on him from inside the copter, staying barely in front of a line of lead that stitched the hardpacked ground behind him.

He came up spraying poison, catching the shooter across the throat and disintegrating the lower half of his face into bloody hamburger.

Another merc was taking no chances. He flung a grenade at Phoenix that landed squarely at his feet. The explosion seemed to hurl his body through the air.

"You lose," the merc said as he and his pard stood over the smoking crater dug by the blast.

Two powerful arms grabbed both mercs' heads and bashed them together from behind, cracking the skulls.

"No," Phoenix said, picking up their SMG's to replace his empty weapon. "*You* lose."

Here, in just this passage alone, we get an idea of Phoenix's attitude—along with a reference to his "old combat reflexes," hinting at some prior fighting experience. The passage also references the name of a specific firearm. This is not always necessary, but some authors like to include the names of firearms in action sequences to give the scene a more "authentic" feel. It's not something that should be overdone, but the occasional specification doesn't hurt. This is true with any weapon, be it sword, gun, chainsaw, whip, magical scepter, etc. Also, while you want to give your reader a visual image of the weapon, don't go overboard and interrupt the action to describe it in *every* physical detail. If need be, a more thorough description should be done before or after the scene in question.

In the late '90s Marc Cerasini wrote a series of superbly written Godzilla novels, based on the Japanese films. Though geared towards young adults, they were remarkably well written—and Cerasini's prose shined brightest during passages of action. Take for example, this scene from his 1997 novel, *Godzilla 2000*:

As the tank skidded to a jolting halt, Patterson knew they were hopelessly stuck. Without thinking, he popped the hatch on the turret. Cold, wet, fresh air washed down onto the gunner. He looked up as his commander stuck his head out of the hatch. “No, sir!” Hammond cried. “Don’t go out there—”

But it was too late.

As the gunner and the loader watched in horror, high-tension electrical wires, alive and crackling with thousands of volts of electricity, dropped down on top of their tank.

Patterson screamed. There was a terrible flash of blue lightening. Then the gunner covered his face as the tank filled with the smell of ozone and the stench of burning flesh.

Finally, what was left of Patterson dropped back down through the hatch as tons of steel from the shattered electrical towers rained down on the crippled tank and its occupants.

Cerasini’s writing here makes you feel like you’re part of the action scene by evoking the reader’s ‘senses.’ Elements like the “cold, wet, fresh air,” can be easily imagined, while “a terrible flash of blue lightening” is a striking visible cue, and—lastly—adding “the smell of ozone and the stench of burning flesh,” conjures up a grotesque odor, even if the reader has no idea what ‘burning flesh’ actually smells like. Each of these sensorial descriptors could be useful in their own right, but notice how Cerasini uses all *three*, and *without* stunting the flow of his scene.

But what if the reader wants to dig a bit deeper into the mind of a character while the action is unfolding? This can be tricky, because you want to keep the action ‘moving’ (or at least give the reader that impression), while entering the character’s thoughts. Joe Schreiber’s horror-themed Star Wars novel, *Red Harvest*, uses this tactic quite often, and with much success. In one riveting scene, a character is being attacked by a zombie-like creature:

The thing landed on the cockpit in front of him, grinning hideously, and began pounding and scratching at the transparisteel. Frode screamed. He couldn’t help it. He didn’t think he’d ever screamed that loud in his life, certainly not in his *adult* life, but terror was booming through him now in big, wide, frantic waves. He felt dizzy with it.

And then he saw something worse.

Outside, the hanger bay was filling with the living dead.

In some circumstances, the action is less about the character’s internal struggle, and the scene simply calls for an event to move the plot forward. In many horror novels, there are characters whose sole purpose is to be introduced, only to meet a grisly end a chapter or two later, all in service of advancing the story. Kelly O’Rourke’s novel, *The Scream Factory*, based on the long-running

Halloween movie franchise, does this with almost mechanical effectiveness:

The mayor froze in terror, clutching his pain-wracked heart. Michael Myers stepped out from the shadows and moved forward with his arms raised.

The mayor let out a bloodcurdling scream.

The blade of the gleaming butcher knife crunched through the mayor's rib cage and slid into his heart. Fresh, red blood seeped from the gaping wound. The mayor let out one last desperate cry as he struggled to remove the knife that protruded from his chest. The last thing Mayor Jamison saw was the horrifying face of Michael Myers looming overhead before everything went white. His heavy, broken body dropped to the floor with a crash. Michael Myers jerked the bloody knife from his chest and listened.

Listened to the desperate screams of a girl.

We never really cared about the mayor in the book, at least up until the point of his demise. So there was no reason to get into his state of mind, the way Schreiber did with Frode in his *Star Wars* novel. Instead, O'Rourke simply goes for a more explicit approach, which serves the story well. Key phrases like "the gleaming butcher knife" add much to the visual flair of the scene. I've read novels that could have extended that same scene over the course of several pages—but would it have been necessary? Sometimes brevity can add more of a 'punch' to an action scene than an overly drawn out one.

Action for the sake of action is a pointless exercise, and one even the most loyal of readers will tire of. But if your action scenes accelerate the plot forward and have some semblance of cause and effect behind them, then you're already on the right track. And if you can *further* augment the action passages with elements that pull the reader into the moment—either by focusing on the character's personal struggle, or by relaying a sense of their surroundings—you're sure to craft a compelling scene.