

Tip #3. Beware the beat

I thought I'd talk on rhythm in writing this month because it has come up in both the short story competitions I've judged for SAWC.

In a nutshell, rhythm in writing is the sound the words make in your head as you read them. New writers, so absorbed as they are with getting the words correct, usually pay scant attention to rhythm. But good writers use rhythm all the time: to evoke emotion, increase or decrease tension, show a character's state of mind, describe movement etc. And you can't escape it. It's there whether you like it or not; if it's written down, it has a rhythm. The danger comes in when the beat is repeated too often. A repetitive beat might be great at a nightclub, but it's a complete downer in writing. The instances I came across most frequently in last year's YA writing competition, had to do with adjectives. Many of the entrants had their adjectives hunt in pairs: "The sleek black car skidded down the narrow twisty lane before slamming into an old wooden lamppost and tumbling down the steep dirt embankment."

This year, I found that quite a few entrants used what I like to call staccato sentences. These are typically sentence clauses joined together with a comma and no conjunction (i.e. without using joining words like "and" or "or" or "before" etc). eg. "I walked to the door, knelt down, put my snowshoes on. Then I stood up, yanked the door open, felt the icy breeze. The wild howled, demons unleashed, shards of ice tore at my face." The problem with both these instances lies in the repetitive beat. A paragraph of this kind of stuff makes for reading that quickly becomes a chore, not a pleasure. The key lies in breaking the rhythm up, but not arbitrarily. The rhythm needs to fit the scene or the character or the emotion. But don't just take my word for it. A recent Facebook post in a writing group I belong to, captured this message far more eloquently than I ever could. Here it is. It belongs to the late Gary Provost, a writing guru from the United States.

"This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is becoming boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums—the crash of the cymbals, sounds that say, listen to this, it is important.

So, write with a combination of short, medium and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music."