

Tip #19. Pacing pitfalls

Last time I spoke about narrative **'tension'**. This time I want to focus on **'pacing'** – two terms that are often used interchangeably and are the source of much confusion to new writers. And yet, while they are related, there is a distinct difference between the two. A difference worth noting since 'poor pacing' is one of the major flaws publishers list among their reasons for rejecting a work.

In a nutshell, pacing has to do with the **'speed'** of the narrative, while tension has to do with the **'emotional state'** of your reader. I like to think of it like this: 'pacing' revolves around 'movement'; tension revolves around 'adrenalin'.

The link between pacing and tension is that the two often walk hand in hand: moments of high adrenalin often take place when the pace is frantic. Conversely, a slower narrative pace is usually associated with a moment of low tension. However, this is not always the case. What is true, is that 'pacing' is a tool or a mechanism for increasing or decreasing 'tension'. But, it is not the only tool!

Why is pacing so important? Pacing is a major contributor to the overall ebb and flow of a story, to the satisfaction imparted to the reader. How often have you felt that a story was moving too slowly? Or that perhaps 'love' or 'hate' between two characters seemed to bloom a little too quickly? Or that a story ended too abruptly? (Indeed, this last criticism was dished out to me by several of the readers of my first book, *Zululand Snow*. Enough for me to realise that it's an area I need to work on in my own writing.)

Pacing has several elements to it and alludes to both the 'speed' of the action taking place in the story as well as the 'speed' at which the story is delivered to the reader.

In terms of the 'delivery', sentence structure is critical to pacing which largely boils down to the speed of reading: long sentences slow the eye which in turn slow down the pace, while short sentences speed it up. Likewise, lengthy monologues slow down pacing, while short, sharp verbal exchanges speed it up. Visually, short paragraphs and chapters can also speed up pacing while longer ones tend to do the opposite. More 'white space' on a page gives the reader the impression they are reading and absorbing the story more quickly, and that the pace has picked up. Even changing the order of chapters can influence the overall pace of a story.

In terms of the 'action' unfolding in the story, a gentle conversation between lovers on a moonlit beach will unfold at a far slower pace than an argument between the same lovers at a nightclub.

The key to pacing then, lies in selecting the correct pace at which to describe and deliver a specific chunk of your story to your reader (scene/dialogue/description etc). And in balancing the pace of these chunks so that they are pleasingly relative to each other, neither overly slow so as to be boring, nor overly quick so as to appear rushed or unbelievable.

Apart from the visual structure, other factors to consider with regards to pacing include:

- Narrative description. i.e. where events, people, places etc are described (particularly within backstory). This can be used to slow down or speed up pacing: more detail, more

colourful prose (metaphors etc) will slow down the pace, while the opposite will also hold true.

- Dialogue. More dialogue typically gives rise to a quicker pace.
- Action v emotional scene. A fight scene will have a greater 'pace' than a scene of a young girl crying into her pillow for example.
- Shifting focus. Shifting focus from one character or place to another will often have the effect of slowing the pace, giving the reader a breather, and allowing the author to rebuild tension once more.
- References to time. The passing of a minute or a week will have very different effects on the pacing of your story at that point in time.
- Quantity of events happening in a scene. Fewer things 'happening' slows the pace, more things 'happening' will increase the pace.

The list goes on. In the end, good pacing in literature is all about getting the balance right. It's about keeping your reader intrigued not fatigued.

Think of your reader as a marathon runner: plan their pace through the landscape of your story carefully. All good marathon coaches do the same for their runners if they want them to finish the race on the podium.