

Tip #22. Transitions

Ever wondered why some stories seem to flow so effortlessly while others seem to stumble awkwardly from character to character or scene to scene? Look closely, it could be the **transitions** which are making all the difference. Transitions in fiction (not to be confused with grammatical transitions, which are more akin to prepositions) are those little words or phrases which cue the reader that a change has taken place, for instance a change in **time** or **location** or **character**. Not only do they signal change, they also bind the different elements of the story together like tiny little stitches. And, like the stitches laid by a good surgeon, they are most pleasing when they are least visible. When transitions are executed skilfully, the reader barely notices the seam. Their eye simply segues smoothly from one element of the story to the next. By contrast, stitches that are poorly placed or badly designed feel rough and scratchy and snag the eye. A good transition is thus both appropriate and innocuous. The beginner writer often pays little attention to these transition and either dispenses with them completely, or more likely, lays down a veritable carpet of stitches such that the reader becomes entangled and frustrated.

But before we go any further, let's look at some examples. Generally, transitions, take one of the following forms:

Location or date-stamp (or both).

Here the author opts to cue the reader directly via a statement of fact. The statement falls outside of the story proper. It's clear and concise (commanding even) and often crops up in military or thriller type stories.

For instance, a chapter might begin: Normandy, May 1945 or Somewhere in the Arctic or Lagos, downtown or Years later... Placed skilfully, these transitions barely interrupt the reader. The reader absorbs the words quickly and moves on to the meat of the story. However, too many of these location/date-stamps impedes the flow and gives the story a jagged, compartmentalised feel.

Deliberate Trail Markers.

Here the author cues the reader of a change through overt statements, either via narration or dialogue, and it's here where beginners often appear ham-handed and heavy footed.

For example, a beginner might start a chapter or scene transition with:

After school he went to his bike and rode home.

She woke up at 05:45 which was when she had set her alarm for.

"Don't worry, Madeline, I know it's a bumpy flight, but we'll be landing in Jo'burg soon."

All of the above transitions come across as ‘telling’ and forced. Better to write:

He was freewheeling out the school gate before the siren’s shrill whine had faded.

Her eyes flicked open. The alarm clock winked at her – 05:45.

“You can put the barf-bag down in a minute, Madeline. I think I see Jo’burg.”

Inferred description.

Here the author uses a much more **indirect** cue. Without baldly telling the reader what’s happening, the author weaves descriptive cues into the narrative to subtly impart information to the reader. For example, the author might start a chapter as follows:

He groaned as he touched a hand to the back of his throbbing skull which felt matted and sticky. His eyes fluttered open to be met with a stale blackness. A damp, salty blackness that seemed to gently sway one way then the other, and that was altogether at odds with the rowdy, fire-lit ale-house he vaguely remembered stumbling into earlier.

Here, from the descriptions (throbbing, sticky, damp, salty, sway, rowdy) without being explicitly told, we can infer that the character has been waylaid during a night of revelry and now finds himself in the hold of a ship. The word ‘ale-house’ also cues us that we’re in a historical, possibly even medieval or fantasy setting.

This last example certainly makes for more interesting reading however the pitfall here is that the author, afraid of ambiguity, over-eggs the description in order to convey exactly what is happening.

In summary, until you feel comfortable transitioning between scenes or characters I would suggest keeping your transitions short, yet interesting, and avoid bluntly telling your reader what’s happening. You’ll find your prose will instantly lift a notch or two.