

Week Nine: Disclosing information, writing action, and ESCALATING your story

Reading: <http://wisdomhomeschooling.com/images/courses/creativewriting/action.pdf>

Disclosure of information

Your main goal as a storyteller is to keep your audience leaning forward. If you throw out too much information too early—or don't give enough information—your audience sits back out of boredom or confusion. The pacing of disclosure of information is determined by your objective, and the effect you want to have on the audience.

Ways to disclose information about a character

- show how your character treats other people
- begin with a straightforward depiction of your character (what you see is what you get)
- use descriptions or dialogue to reveal who your character is
- don't ever have the character *say* everything; *show us* through what they do
- be hard on your character (a great way to get your reader to like them!)
- give your character a choice; show how your character reacts in a crisis
- what your character does defines him (and reveals motivation)

Writing action

There are three elements necessary for an action sequence:

- (1) the conflict between the characters is primarily physical
- (2) the challenges that must be overcome demand physical action
- (3) the danger to the characters is primarily physical and often life-threatening

Where possible, the stakes should be emotional as well as physical. If your hero isn't scared, the reader isn't scared. You have to establish there is real danger. The villain is smart. (Of course, your hero is smarter.) In great action sequences, the hero is usually outgunned and outmatched. It seems like he *can't* win. And you're hero must fail. Far too often people think the key to an action sequence is a character that can take on any challenge and squash it. But your hero is often defined by his failures; because he is your hero, and he undertakes great challenges, his failures are impressive failures. Once you show that your hero can fail, the climax is that much more suspenseful. He failed before: will he succeed in the end?

To make your action sequences better, **make the situation worse**. When a situation is so bad for your hero that the reader cannot see a way out of it—the last thing they expect you to do is make the situation worse. The stakes keep escalating and take your breath away even more. If you every find yourself stuck and asking, How do I get my main character out of this situation? Instead of stopping there, try making it even worse. Sometimes that will suggest a way out.

The story **must** change as a result of your action sequence.

ESCALATION

Escalation is an escalation of the action (or plot), making the lives of your characters even more exciting, messy, and interesting. Escalation will start to build an arc and structure to your story.

A good example of escalation is the fairy tale of the three little pigs. First, the wolf blows down a house of straw. Then he blows down a house of sticks. Anyone might expect a house of straw to fall over, but a house made of sticks—that has a better chance of standing up to a breeze. So when the wolf blows that down, too, it feels more extreme. And the reader is set up to believe that when the wolf faces a house of bricks, he'll probably blow that down, too.

Tips on escalation

1. **Create patterns.** Don't bring in new characters, settings, or objects. Instead, take out a previous element and use that. It will help create patterns in your story.
2. **Add some back story.** When a reader knows more about a character's history, the character becomes more complex. It also helps to explain a character's true motivations in the current action.
3. **Embrace disaster.** Allowing something bad to happen to your character not only generates sympathy (your reader will like him)—it also slides them into even more trouble. Sometimes the best way to get a character out of a difficult situation is to make it even worse.
4. **Start a fight.** There's nothing like a disagreement or a competition to ratchet up the tension in a scene.
5. **Reveal a secret.** What are your characters holding inside and not sharing with anyone? Their secret is probably pretty juicy? What would happen if it accidentally spilled out? What would happen if *today* was the day they were going to be honest? How would it change the story?

In-class exercise:

Have everyone come up with two characters, a setting, and a secret for one of the characters. Then have them write a short scene (in about 10 minutes) where these two characters have a conversation and the secret is revealed—without either of them directly saying it. For example: During a lunch at McDonalds, a man wants to tell a woman he loves her. But the one thing he CANNOT say is "I love you." How does this secret get revealed?

Homework

Write another two pages.