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Anatomy of a Fight Scene

Part Two – The Craft of Writing

By Maxwell Alexander Drake

author@maxadrake.com

www.MaxwellAlexanderDrake.com

www.GenesisOfOblivion.com

www.DownfallTheComic.com

The Big Question

What does this do for my story?

In everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it does not mean it will work for you. Remember, creativity is subjective. - DRAKE

Writing Violence

“Fighting is like champagne. It goes to the heads of cowards as quickly as of heroes. Any fool can be brave on a battlefield when it's be brave or else be killed.”

- Margaret Mitchell 1900 - 1949

Planning is the key to successfully writing a fight scene

As we discussed in part one of this class, the key to a successfully written fight scene comes from planning. First understanding why we write violence – insuring that the scene is going to move our plot, and grow our characters. Then understanding the combatants – their skill level, motivation, and thought process. And finally making sure we understand how the environment will affect things.

But, once we answer all those tough questions, how do we use words to convey what we want to say?

That is where the work comes in

Writing a fight scene is just like any other type of creative writing. A writer should understand the craft of writing and how to implement it to create an immersive read. Just as dialogue has its own special rules that are different from how to craft great narrative, a fight scene has its own special tricks when it comes to smithing the words used to create it.

To that end, here are nine tricks you can use to help you write better fight scenes.

Thinking Point One: The Speed of Time

When it comes to the actual fight, there are two “time rates” that you need to think about. You can’t write a fight scene in real time. A person simply can’t “read” action as fast as they can “see” action. So, you have two options. You can either slow down time, or speed it up.

Slowing down time is essential if you are going to write a “blow by blow” scene where you are going to describe each punch, dodge and kick.

Speeding up time is essential to avoid repetition. For example, it is awesome to read about a hero fighting a bad guy. Wincing over each blow. But, if the hero is about to fight forty bad guys, writing each individual fight, with each individual guy would simply be redundant and boring.

Use the reason for the scene to help you determine what method to use.

Thinking Point Two: Let the Outcome Motivate the Scene

Not only do you need to decide how fast or slow you are going to adjust time, to make matters more complicated, you need to think about whether you want to write the scene from an external or introspective mindset.

External is simply immersing the character in the moment. Not a lot of time to think about things—it is react or die. This is great if you just want to show some action, and the outcome of the scene is physically motivated. I.E. gaining some item, getting past something, etc.

Introspective is a way of having your character in an event, but not really paying much attention to it. It is a time where the character is “thinking” about why they are doing what they are doing and how they got here. This is great for moving the plot in a way that is more than just, “I need to kill this guy because he is in my way.”

Again, use the reason for the scene to help you determine what method to use.

Thinking Point Three: Action is not Passive

We have done a lot of thinking to get here. Now let’s get into the nuts and bolts of the craft of writing – words, sentences and paragraphs.

How you craft your sentences will impact the readers experience during the scene. A writer must write a fight scene with the understanding that they are writing action. Passiveness (passive voice and passive verbs) has no place in action. (There are exceptions to this, but they should be used sparingly.)

Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

This can be a tricky topic to master, but it is not tricky to understand.

In an Active Voice Sentence, the SUBJECT is doing the ACTION.

The dog bit the boy. (The dog is our subject, and bit is our action.)

John loves Jane. (John is our subject, and loves is our action.)

In a Passive Voice Sentence, the TARGET OF THE ACTION gets promoted to the SUBJECT POSITION.

The boy was bitten by the dog. (Now the subject of the sentence is the boy, but he is not doing any action.)

Jane is loved by John. (Again, Jane is now our subject, and again, she isn’t doing anything.)

The bad thing about Passive Voice is that in many cases, you can omit the acting noun and still have a complete sentence.

The boy was bitten. (Now we have a sentence where we, the reader, have no idea who or what has done the biting.)

Jane is loved. (Loved by who? A man? Her Mother? The entire world! We just don't know.)

Use Strong, Active Verbs

Remember that English is the result of stealing words from half the world's languages. This gives us an amazingly huge selection of words to choose from that all mean the same thing, yet evoke different emotions.

The cowboy put his gun into his holster, turned and walked out of the bar.

The cowboy slammed his gun into his holster, turned and stormed out of the bar.

Just by changing the verbs, you can really show the emotions of the characters.

This is also true for describing physical events.

The bullet hit John in the chest, and he fell backwards.

As opposed to:

The bullet ripped into John's chest, flinging him backwards.

Thinking Point Four: For Every Action, there is a Reaction

If you are slowing down time, and going blow-by-blow, keep in mind that for the most part you want to keep the order of your sentences in an Action then Reaction order. This helps the reader visualize the action as it happens, letting them become immersed in it.

Jill punched John in the face causing him to stagger back.

As opposed to:

John staggered back after Jill punched him in the face.

The problem with writing the action out of order is that you force the reader to take the time to think about what they just read. This not only pulls them out of the story, but slows down the "feel" of the action.

Thinking Point Five: Short Sentences = Read, thus feel, Faster

Another trick to writing action is to shorten your sentence length. This will cause the reader to read faster, thus giving the illusion of speed in the action. Commas work well for this purpose also, just don't overuse them.

Still, never lose sight that creative writing is about balance. Do not cut every sentence to noun and verb. If you do, it will not read well.

This also takes us back to Trick Three. Because, by shortening your sentences, you now have to make sure you are picking words that give you the most dramatic bang for the buck. "Sally hit John in the face." is fine. But, "Sally smashed John in the face." or even "Sally's fist smashed into John's face." is better.

Thinking Point Six: Don't Lose Your Reader

Regardless if you are writing blow-by-blow or more loosey-goosey, make sure your reader knows where the characters are during the scene.

If you are going for the blow-by-blow, you need to be fluid and precise. If your fight starts on one side of the room, then somehow is on a different side of the room with no explanation of how your characters got there, the reader will be confused. That is why it is a good idea to act out each scene. And keep in mind, just because you know what is going on, does not mean your reader does. Make sure you connect the dots.

If you are going with a more introverted scene, you still need to make sure you don't lose your reader. Give them clues so they have a sense of place at all times.

Thinking Point Seven: Don't Skimp on the Details

For the most dramatic impact, make sure you give as much detail as you can without slowing down the action.

Remember, we want to immerse our readers into our stories. To do this, we need to give them details. In a blow-by-blow scenario, don't just describe the punch, describe how it felt.

Jill's fist slammed into John's face, whipping his head back. Pain shot through his jaw. His tongue flicked to the area, probing a vacant hole where a tooth used to be.

Thinking Point Eight: Don't Info Dump During Action

One of the worst things you can do is try to explain things like "world building items" or "plot devices" during your action scene. A fight is no place for an information dump. Once the fight starts, let it go. If you reach a good pausing point, and there is just some piece of information the reader must know, fine. Otherwise, keep your action... well... action.

John swung his sword at the Gorlab. Gorlabs are large winged creatures from the pit of the abyss that are a mix between dragons and bad children who don't wash behind their ears. The sword cleaved the beast in twain.

Thinking Point Nine: Dialogue is at Home Everywhere

Do not be afraid of dialogue in a fight scene. People talk before, during and after fights. So let your characters speak if you feel they would. Again, walking through the scene before you start to write it will give you some really great insight as to where you might use dialogue.

Perhaps the villain wants to gloat a bit after a particularly good attack. Perhaps the hero wants to give the person they are fighting one more opportunity to stand down. Whatever the reason, if it feels like it fits, it probably does.

Just try and stay away from the 1980s action movie cliché lines. "You've got to ask yourself one question: Do you feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?"

End

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative. I have started a blog dedicated to the discussion of the craft of writing. If you have specific questions, please send them to me at author@maxadrake.com and I will include them on blog.maxwellalexanderdrake.com.

I am on Facebook and Twitter as well. Please look me up.

If you want to help further my teaching career, please visit <http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Creative-Writing-Class/> and review this class. It would be a tremendous help to me.

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