

LESSON ONE: What flavor is that word?

Greetings, Salutations, and Yo! Writers!

Welcome to the first lesson in WRITING KICK-BUTT ACTION-ADVENTURE. For the next month, we're going to examine, dissect, and resolve one of the most common problems in today's commercial genre fiction novels: Sucky action scenes. Action scenes which fail to be active. Action scenes that are confusing, contradictory, illogical and, well, just boring.

This isn't because writers have forgotten how to write—though in some cases it may be that writing techniques need to be fluffed. But many problems with writing action scenes happen because the reading audience has changed and writing styles have been slow to catch up with that.

Today's reading audience has immediate text messaging, instant dinners from the microwave, over seven hundred channels on television, and download-it-now books and movies. Today's reading audience is also more visually-oriented than readers fifty years ago. Today's readers are far more familiar with video games... which they play on their cell phones... then with languid prose (which they can also read on their cell phones but often don't).

Today's reading audience is not the same as the reader of Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" adventures in the late 1800s (or even the mid-1920s!). When Sherlock admonished Watson to be quick because "The game's afoot!" things were often anything but quick... and more often than not action occurred off-camera or were told in a later-over-a-cup-of-tea recounting. That was the style then, that was what editors and readers expected back then. To wit:

****... As he spoke the gleam of the side-lights of a carriage came round the curve of the avenue. It was a smart little landau which rattled up to the door of Briony Lodge. As it pulled up, one of the loafing men at the corner dashed forward to open the door in the hope of earning a copper, but was elbowed away by another loafer, who had rushed up with the same intention. A fierce quarrel broke out, which was increased by the two guardsmen, who took sides with one of the loungers, and by the scissors-grinder, who was equally hot upon the other side. A blow was struck, and in an instant the lady, who had stepped from her carriage, was the centre of a little knot of flushed and struggling men, who struck savagely at each other with their fists and sticks. Holmes dashed into the crowd to protect the lady; but just as he reached her he gave a cry and dropped to the ground, with the blood running freely down his face. At his fall the guardsmen took to their heels in one direction and the loungers in the other, while a number of better-dressed people, who had watched the scuffle without taking part in it, crowded in to help the lady and to attend to the injured man. Irene Adler, as I will still call her, had hurried up the steps; but she stood**

at the top with her superb figure outlined against the lights of the hall, looking back into the street.

"Is the poor gentleman much hurt?" she asked... ** From A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 1891.

(SIDE NOTE: I am a dyed-in-the-deerstalker huge fan of Conan Doyle and Holmes. I am NOT using this as an example to in any way denigrate these wonderful and classic stories. Rather, we're looking at How Things Have Changed. Okay?)

Let's look at that selection again, specifically:

... A fierce quarrel broke out... A blow was struck, ... and struggling men, who struck savagely at each other with their fists and sticks...

We're told here what's happening, but we neither hear it nor smell it nor taste it nor feel it. We couldn't, not in 1891. That simply wasn't the way an author wrote back then. (Telling was in vogue; showing wasn't. Today we demand Show don't Tell!)

That means today's author must write with all the senses and all the action:

**... He lunged. I dropped into a low crouch, and his knife missed me by an inch and a hair, slashing the scarlet and gilt wallpaper covering the wall behind me.

I hadn't survived my thirty-something years by being squeamish. I twisted my body, going for an uppercut straight into his nuts, what I got was his fist on my back, pounding me flat to the floor and knocking the air out of me. His knife was going to follow his fist. I needed to roll, move, anything, but all my body could manage was a wheezing gasp. Stupid body. I managed to turn my head to the side and sank my teeth into his ankle.

He bellowed in pain and rage, and I felt a thump as Sid the necromancer jumped on his back and began beating him on the head with his drawstring pouch of ghost dust, pixie powder, or whatever the hell it was. I used the distraction to drag, crawl, and finally scramble my way out of knife range.

Once I was on my feet, I drew my sword from the harness on my back. The naked guy whirled face me while reaching back over his shoulder, trying to dislodge Sid. I had to hand it to the little necromancer; he held on like a tick with one thin arm locked around the man's throat, while the other continued to beat him on the head with the pouch—that is, until the naked guy snatched it away from him.

Oh damn. (from Lisa Shearin's BEWITCHED & BETRAYED, Penguin, 2010) ... **
<http://www.lisashearin.com/sample-chapters/?b=4&ch=1>)

Do you all see the similarities here? And the differences? Basically, in both a “fierce quarrel broke out.” But in Shearin’s—and by the way, Shearin is a competition-ranked swordswoman in real life—we’re part of this quarrel, we’re part of its sensations, its emotions. We’re also part of the main character.

What’s the difference between the two? Oddly, their word count is almost identical, about 250 words. But it’s WORD CHOICE, and that’s where we’re going to start Lesson One.

“Word choice?” you warble plaintively. “But that’s so basic. Isn’t there more to writing great action than that?”

Yes. Writing workable, fun, interesting, believable action takes more than just proper word choice. It takes an understanding of pacing, logic, cause-and-effect, and a certain knowledge about the action itself as well.

But WORD CHOICE is critical. You may hold a black belt in karate, but without the proper word choice your ability to make the reader FEEL THE FIGHT (in commercial genre fiction) will fail.

Some words about words:

(1) Anything you describe in detail the reader will remember.

(2) Anytime you describe something in detail you slow down the action.

Keeping those two important codicils in mind, let’s talk about words.

All words are not equal. Words have weight. Words convey images. Words convey opinions. A *pretty* girl is not the same as a *beautiful* girl who is not the same as *gorgeous* girl. A woman who is plump may also be voluptuous but ‘plump’ and ‘voluptuous’ have two different ‘opinion modes,’ two different ‘perceptions’ based on value judgments. The latter, *voluptuous*, is often associated with cleavage and the former, *plump*, with being dowdy. And in today’s society, *voluptuous* is a positively perceived judgment and *dowdy* is not.

In the same sense, when writing action, a ‘slice’ is not the same as a ‘cut.’ *Jack’s knife cut across Dan’s arm...* gives a slightly milder (and less painful) picture than *Jack’s knife sliced down Dan’s arm.*

It’s a matter of degree, yes, but when it comes to writing commercial genre fiction, that degree is a critical one. To quote Mark Twain, there’s a huge difference between butter and a butterfly.

It’s essential you have a thesaurus, preferably more than one. I have three, one being Roget’s in dictionary form. If you’re not familiar with thesauruses (thersauri?) and their

forms (ie: dictionary form), ASK. These are important writer tools to help you decide which flavor of word you need to employ.

Yeppers, I said FLAVOR. I like to think of words as having FLAVORS. Some are mild, some are spicy, some are bold, some are delicate. There are also happy words, angry words, snobby words, funny words, spooky words, and gross-out words—and I’m talking about more than just definitions. I’m talking about the way they sound, the images they evoke, the way they look on the page, the sub-text meanings they may have. You can probably think of additional categories—you will have more categories once you finish this class. These categories will help you match the word to the scene and/or the genre you’re writing.

But for starters:

Happy-Flavored Words: puppy, kitty, giggle, baby, pizza, pirouette

Unhappy-Flavored Words: terrorist, pedophile, arrest, death, sadist

Scary-Flavored Words: zombie, creaking, sneak, shattered, creep

Do you understand why I label certain words “happy” or “scary?” The reason goes beyond the definition. It’s the sound of the word, the visual impact of the word, the FLAVOR of the word. Happy-flavor words tend to be shorter and have an “ee” sound or ending. Puppy. Kitty. Scary-flavor words tend to sound harsher and use hard consonants. Creak. Shatter. Note: These designations can and will change depending on story, character, genre—and culture.

But it makes writing more fun when you can sit back and chortle, “Ooh, spooky-word time!”

Chortle. Now isn’t that a great word? It sounds rather like what it is and does. And that’s another flavor, another category of words: Onomatopoeia. A word that sounds like what it describes. Words as *sound effects*.

Let’s toddle over to Thesaurus.com and take a peek at CHORTLE:

Main Entry: chortle

Part of Speech: verb

Definition: laugh gleefully

Synonyms: cackle, chuckle, crow, giggle, guffaw, hee-haw, snicker, sniggle, snort, teehee, titter

Ooh, what glorious word flavors. Snicker, sniggle, and titter. Who snickers? The class bully? The office gossip? Who titters? Your maiden aunt Esmeralda? Would a two-hundred-ninety-pound Sumo wrestler titter?

Notice that the words you choose **have a lot to say about the character they describe** or are aligned with. (And let me repeat that point for those of you in the back who are snickering over something on Twitter: *the words you choose have a lot to say about the character they describe.*) A tittering Sumo wrestler is a different character than a guffawing Sumo wrestler. And a laughing Sumo wrestler—well, he’s just kind of bland, isn’t he?

We could have lots of fun with words. We could pick a word, find synonyms, and play all day.

But when you’re writing action, you don’t have that luxury. Action scenes, by their very nature, need to proceed as quickly as possible (that gets to pacing, and we’ll get to that in an upcoming lecture). In writing action scenes, you can’t lather on gobs and gobs of flavorful words like so much gooey marshmallow icing on a cupcake. You not only run the risk of slowing the pacing down to a crawl, you run the risk of the reader focusing too closely on your gushingly effervescent word choice and losing the forward motion of the scene.

You must choose your words with the precision of a surgeon’s scalpel. You eviscerate the superfluous. You do not go in like a ham-handed butcher, hacking and jabbing. You do things—to quote the Wicked Witch of the West—delicately.

We will talk about just that—recognizing and rooting out the wrong word—in the second half of this lesson, in a day or three. For now, let’s really get to know the flavors of words.

I know this might seem a simplistic lesson to many of you. You deal with words all the time, more intimately as you write your scenes. The purpose of me going back down to this basic level is to reorient HOW you deal with words and HOW you THINK about words FROM THIS POINT ON. So, bear with me, humor me, and do the homework.

HOMEWORK: Exploring the flavors of words

1. List three scary-flavored nouns
2. List three funny-flavored adjectives
3. List three “onomatopoeia-category” verbs
4. List three words that simply strike you as unusual or interesting words—and explain why.

PLEASE POST YOUR ANSWERS IN THE HOMEWORK ONE SECTION BEFORE END OF DAY, (depending on your time zone...) MARCH 6TH.

Thank you!