

HOW TO WRITE A CHARACTER'S ACTIONS

By Mike Klaassen

As described by Evan Marshall in *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, action is the mode fiction writers use to show what is happening at any given moment in the story.ⁱ

Action is important in each of the five elements of fiction.

- PLOT is the “what happens” in a story, and action is the backbone of plot.
- Action is the fiction-writing mode for portraying a CHARACTER in motion, and nothing reveals more about a character than his actions.
- SETTING is the stage upon which action occurs, but it may also be an important source of action.
- What a character does, and how those actions affect others, may determine the story’s THEME(s).
- How action is used in a story is an important aspect of each writer’s STYLE.

The strength of action as a fiction-writing mode is that it can make writing exciting and realistic. Action is at the heart of showing versus telling. According to Jordan E. Rosenfeld, in *Make a Scene*, action scenes help the “. . . reader to feel he is participating in the events . . .”ⁱⁱ

On the other hand, action has its drawbacks: it can take up a lot of space, and it can be time-consuming to write. Too much action at one time can wear out the reader.

The concept of action as a fiction-writing mode is simple, but its effective presentation involves numerous issues:

- Active vs. passive voice
- Real time
- Details
- Chronological order
- Stimulus-response order
- Response-stimulus order
- Incidental action
- Scenes and sequels

ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE VOICE

The use of active voice (instead of passive voice) is essential in the action mode. As explained by Gary Lutz and Diane Stevenson in *The Writer’s Digest Grammar Desk Reference*, voice is a characteristic of verbs referring to the agent of action within a sentence. A verb is said to be active if the subject of the sentence performs the action. The use of passive voice isn’t incorrect, “but it creates a strange and unnecessary sense of disembodied action.” Examples provided by Lutz and Stevenson include:

- John hit the ball. (Active voice)
- The ball was hit by John. (Passive voice)ⁱⁱⁱ

The action mode is all about showing, not telling, and the last thing the writer wants is to “disembody” action, creating distance between the action, the character, and the reader.

REAL TIME

In a story, action occurs in the “present” of the story, the story’s “now,” its “real time,” as opposed to backstory, future story, or a summarized account of the event. As stated by Evan Marshall, “In action mode, you show events . . . as they occur . . .”^{iv} According to Jordan E. Rosenfeld, in *Make a Scene*, “. . . the reader will feel like he is participating in action because the events unfold in ‘real time’ . . .”^v

DETAILS.

As Marshall explains in *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, “When you are in the action writing mode, don’t accidentally slip into the summary writing mode. In the action writing mode, everything—even seemingly unimportant details—gets shown.”^{vi} Vivid details help the reader to be there—to experience the moment, the drama.

CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

In the action mode, events are presented in strict chronological order as they occur. According to Evan Marshall, “In real life, things are always happening at the same time. It’s a chaotic world. Not so in the fictional world. In the fictional world, things happen one at a time, and that’s how you show them.”^{vii}

Marshall advises writers to “Present all events one at a time, not simultaneously. Writing so that one action happens after another makes for smoother, more natural, more professional-reading text. Even a complicated battle is rendered action-by-action by an accomplished novelist.”^{viii}

This advice may seem obvious, but presenting events simultaneously is an easy trap to fall into, especially when starting sentences with phrases that begin with time-sensitive prepositions or words ending with *-ing*. The unintended result may be subtle glitches in timing or outright physical impossibilities. As observed by Evan Marshall, “In action writing, the word *as* is your enemy. So are *while* and *at same time that*.”^{ix}

Renni Browne and Dave King, in *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* note that sentences beginning with *-ing*, or *as* may be grammatically correct and express the action clearly and unambiguously, but they also tend to place some of your action at one remove from your reader, to make actions seem incidental, unimportant. According to Browne and King, “If you use these constructions often, you weaken your writing.”^x

Also observe Browne and King, “Another reason to avoid the *as* and *-ing* constructions is that they can give rise to physical impossibilities.” For example, ‘Disappearing into my tent, I changed into fresh jeans.’ The *-ing* construction forced simultaneity on two actions that can’t be simultaneous.”^{xi}

“We’re not suggesting that you avoid these phrases altogether,” state Browne and King. “There are going to be times when you want to write about two actions that are actually simultaneous and/or genuinely incidental—actions that deserve no more than a dependent clause.”^{xii}

The warning is clear. In the action mode, be careful when beginning sentences with a time-sensitive preposition or a word ending with *-ing*.

STIMULUS-RESPONSE ORDER

The action mode is all about things happening, but not just any old thing. Action must make sense. Someone or something does something for a reason, and then someone or something responds. Action meets resistance, and then there is reaction. The logic of action-mode writing is cause and effect.

According to Evan Marshall, “Present action in action-result order. She looks—and sees. He bites—and tastes. She asks—he answers. The arrow hits him—he cries out.”^{xiii}

In the vast majority of action writing, stimulus precedes response. For example: Someone shouted a warning. Cisco ducked and drew his revolver.

RESPONSE-STIMULUS ORDER

Most action writing works best if the response follows the corresponding stimulus. But there is an important exception. In Tip # 51 of the *Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, Evan Marshall states that “To show a character’s reaction to something shocking, break the action/result rule and show the reaction before describing what is being reacted to.” In these situations, “. . . you’ll create a more dramatic effect if you have your character react first, then describe what it is he has seen.”^{xiv}

As explained by Marshall, “This technique works for a couple of reasons. First, a tiny moment of suspense is created between the horrified reaction and the description of what’s being seen; . . . Second, a truly awful spectacle will most likely require a good amount of description. If you describe the spectacle at length, then show your character’s reaction, there’s the danger of creating an odd, delayed-reaction effect that is not desirable.”^{xv}

Here's an example of action in response-stimulus order: Cisco froze. Black Bart had drawn his pistol.

INCIDENTAL ACTION

Action is frequently presented in tiny portions, sometimes called beats. These small bits of activity may be revealing. According to Sandra Scofield, in *The Scene Book*, “The incidental movements and activities of characters help to define them . . .” and also “. . . what [characters] do in response to events can be external signs of what they are feeling.”^{xvi}

Even when bits of action and reaction are not revealing, they may be weaved into other fiction-writing modes to help set rhythm and pace.

SCENES AND SEQUELS

A scene is a unit of drama, where a character attempts (often unsuccessfully) to achieve a goal. A sequel is what follows a scene. While action is the backbone of scenes, action is usually incidental in sequels.

Action-writing is sometimes referred to as writing in “scene,” (as in “You write either in scene or you write in summary.”) This is an outdated use of the term and misrepresents both the concept of scene in fiction and the concept of action as a fiction-writing mode. A scene consists of much more than just the action writing mode. And action may be present in either scenes or sequels.

The answer to the question of how to write the actions of your fictional characters is to thoroughly understand and apply the mechanics of the action fiction-writing mode.

LEARN MORE

Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order at traditional and online bookstores. You may “Look Inside” the eBook edition at Amazon.com.

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ⁱ Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*. Paperback edition, Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 1998, 142. ISBN: 9781582970622.

ⁱⁱ Rosenfeld, Jordan E. *Make a Scene*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 2008, 173. ISBN: 9781582974798.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lutz, Gary and Stevenson, Diane. *The Writer’s Digest Grammar Desk Reference*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 2005, 30. ISBN: 9781582973357.

^{iv} Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Novel*, 142.

^v Rosenfeld, *Make a Scene*, 173.

^{vi} Marshall, Evan. *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer’s Digest Books, 2003, 27. ISBN: 9781582971964.

^{vii} Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Novel Writing*, 143.

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- viii Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, 25.
- ix Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, 143.
- x Browne, Renni and David King. *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: Harper Resource, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 193, 2004. ISBN: 9780060545697.
- xi Brown and King, 194.
- xii Brown and King, 194.
- xiii Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, 26.
- xiv Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, 56-57.
- xv Marshall, *The Marshall Plan for Getting Your Novel Published*, 56-57.
- xvi Scofield, Sandra. *The Scene Book*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007, 126. ISBN: 9780143038269.