



**Crime & Mystery
Useful Background
Reading**

**Collated for Readers of
The Busy Writer's Tips on
Writing Mystery and Crime**



The Busy Writer's Tips on Mystery and Crime

Bonus PDF

Useful Resources & Website Links

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The Busy Writer's Tips on Mystery and Crime

Useful Resources for Crime & Mystery Writers

Mystery Writers of America

<http://mysterywriters.org/>

Crime Writers of Canada

<http://www.crimewriterscanada.com/>

British Crime Writers Association

<https://thecwa.co.uk/>

Crime Scene Investigation

<http://www.crime-scene-investigator.net/>

FBI Site

<http://www.fbi.gov/>

Zeno's Forensic Page (*Lots of relevant links*)

<http://forensic.to/>

Sisters in Crime

<http://www.sistersincrime.org/>

Sisters in Crime Australia

<http://www.sistersincrime.org.au/>

Internet Research Resources for Mystery and Crime Writers

<http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/feb99/gak12.htm>

Internet Movie Database

<http://www.imdb.com/>

5 Ideas for Plot Twists

by Marg McAlister

I admit that this might start to sound a bit like the developments in your favorite (or most-hated) soap opera - but remember: readers LOVE to be surprised!

Your job is to tread the fine line between giving them a plot twist that they didn't see coming, and having them roll their eyes and groan because the twist is totally unbelievable. The best twists manage to come as a total surprise to your readers, while still being necessary to the plot. (Now THAT'S got to test your skills as an author!)

1. Reveal that the main character's sibling/mother/father is no blood relation at all.

(How can this be? Who's keeping secrets? Why doesn't the main character know? How did he/she find out? What implications does it have for the story?)

2. Reveal that the answer the main character has been seeking has been in plain sight the whole time...

but when he realizes this, he finds that this leads to an even greater dilemma. (To create this, open the story with the main character searching for an answer to something that is important to him. It has to be 'big' enough for the reader to care about in the first instance. Now think about how this can escalate - in a totally unexpected way. While this DOES raise the stakes, it's about more than raising the stakes - it's about turning the main character's beliefs upside down; it's about complete dislocation.)

3. The main character and his rival are forced to team up so they don't BOTH fail. So far, this is a well-known plot direction (I wouldn't even call it a twist). But you can make it into a twist by having the main character prepare a plan B, just in case... so when he is double-crossed by his rival, he is able to set Plan B in motion. Surprise the reader by showing the main character making certain preparations that pave the way for Plan B, BUT which could also fit into the main action of the story. You have to hide what you're doing from the reader, while still playing fair. Great fun!

4. The main character is hell-bent on revenge: because of the way you have set it up, the reader should be totally convinced that anyone in this situation would want revenge. They should be cheering for the heroine as she enacts her plan. BUT - then our heroine discovers that her target is also out for revenge on HER; they have both been set up. (Your job is to work out why they've been set up; how they begin to trust each other, and how to keep the reader from guessing what is behind it all.)

5. The bad guy is not dead after all. (Ho hum. Yes, I know. This has been in so many movies/books/videos that it's humdrum. The 'body' comes to life; the creature rises again from the deep...) But wait. The twist here is this: The bad guy is finally vanquished. Hero breathes a sigh of relief. So does the reader. But then... hero has reason to believe that Bad Guy is NOT dead. He doggedly continues the chase. BUT... the Bad Guy IS dead. The threat is coming from someone else... (Why? Who is this person? Why did the main character think that it might be the original Bad Guy? Make sure that the new threat is believable and that the motivation is there for a renewed attack on the Hero.)

These are just a few examples. You can come up with your own twists by taking your basic plot idea and asking 'What if...?'. Then ask 'What if...?' again. Then ask "How could this get worse?". Keep going until you start coming up with a few out-of-the-box scenarios. It's when you keep pushing that you'll come up with the 'surprises' that the reader loves.

Two Tips for Creating Plot Twists:

1. Set the stage carefully. Without giving away too much in the early stages of the novel, you have to sneakily feed in small details and well-disguised clues, so the reader says later "I should have guessed!" It's a bit like being an illusionist. You want the reader to see you doing one thing, while really something else is going on... something they should have seen for themselves.

2. Twist then twist again. When you come up with your first 'twist' idea, keep tweaking it. Pull it this way, then that way. Ask what happens if you follow this path, but bring in another character, or move the setting to a different town. Ask what happens if you introduce something from the past. Readers love a good twist... but they love it even more if you surprise them a second time!

Turning Points in a Novel

by Marg McAlister

What are "TURNING POINTS" in a novel?

Put simply: a turning point in a story is A POINT AT WHICH THINGS CHANGE.

You should be able to find a turning point in most of your scenes: it's an indication that your story is moving forward. Any story is full of *degrees* of change, or small changes.

However, you need to clearly understand your story's MAJOR turning points. These are the ones you want to play up. If you can heighten the drama in your major turning points, your readers will see that your characters are growing and changing, and will want to live through these changes with them. Well-written scenes featuring major turning points heighten the tension and build the pace.

Often, turning points involve a 'light bulb moment'. The character (let's call him Harry) comes to realize that:

- his old way of looking at things is no longer viable
- he has outgrown his childhood friends, or conversely
- only his friends from childhood appreciate the 'real Harry'
- it's time to let go of the past (e.g. bitter feelings towards his ex-wife; victimization in high school)
- his own stubbornness has landed him to his present predicament

You can see, too, that the light bulb moments above all involve EMOTIONAL turning points, which are so important in any novel. Emotional turning points often involve letting go, or accepting a loss.

There are other kinds of turning points. What else can make the novel change direction, or set Harry on a new course?

- a reversal of some kind
- new information
- a disaster - involving nature, or man-made objects, or technology gone wrong
- a change in the course of events
- a twist (such as revealing that a certain character is not who Harry thought he was, or that research he has been asked to do is to be used for a completely different purpose)
- a challenge

If you clearly understand the major turning points in your novel, you will also find that writing a synopsis is much easier. The editor or agent reading your synopsis will notice the difference, too: turning points are like road signs; they show that the author knows what he/she is doing.

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Just Too Convenient...

by Marg McAlister

Last year, I critiqued several scenes in one week for a writer. In two of them, she'd made life much too easy for her characters. In the first scene, complete strangers offered the children shelter and food. In the second, one of them needed to hide... and lo and behold, there was a convenient tree to duck behind. In both cases, I highlighted the relevant sections and made a note: "Too convenient!"

The writer wrote back. "What's this about 'convenience'?" she wanted to know. "I've read through the course materials - and there's nothing there about it. How do I know what to look for?"

Hmmmm. I could see her point. She wasn't the only one running into trouble because of the same thing. I'd had to make the same comment on a number of manuscripts. I immediately decided to make this the subject of an article one day.

That day has now come. It's time to share a few tips on how to make life a little more INconvenient for your characters! We'll look at four main areas of 'convenience'.

1. CONVENIENT KNOWLEDGE OR SKILLS.

I've lost count of the number of times a character has conveniently "remembered" how to build a raft, or how to hack into a website, or how to cook a damper. Or maybe they've suddenly developed an amazing aptitude to step into the CEO's job and run a major corporation (after never having done anything like it before). Usually, the author passes it off by writing something like this: "He looked at the fast-flowing stream and knew that he'd

have trouble swimming across. Thank goodness he still had Brian's tomahawk in his backpack. And it was a good thing that he'd watched that TV program last week about how to build a raft..."

Oh, honestly. What reader is going to swallow that? A convenient tomahawk? And a convenient how-to-build-a-raft TV show, the week before he needs it? Not a chance!

If you want your character to have a certain piece of knowledge or certain skills, then you have to set this up well ahead of the scene where he needs it. If he's going to have to execute a swift kick to the chin to disable one of the bad guys, then show him doggedly sticking to his kick-boxing classes even though he's nowhere near the best. Or show him coming home triumphantly bearing a second place trophy for karate. (First prize might be a bit much.)

The same applies to expert knowledge of computers, horses, cars, planes, cooking, business management... you name it. It is NOT good enough to have your character 'remember' that he's read a book about it or seen it on TV. (Unless you show him trying to put these dim memories into practice and failing miserably. THEN it's okay.)

2. CONVENIENT HIDING PLACES OR SHELTER.

If your character seems to be in danger of being caught, it's very tempting to have her duck behind a tree, squat behind a rock, or step into a cupboard. (It's not so easy to slide under a bed these days - not when the box spring base is two inches off the floor.)

NO! Before you allow that to happen, think again.

What if there is NO convenient tree? What if she's in the middle of an open area of ground? What could she do THEN to hide? (This is going to make your story so much more interesting.)

If you're sitting there thinking that you HAVE to put in a tree, because otherwise she's simply going to get caught... well, why not? What would it do to your story if she did get caught? Probably make things a whole lot more dire for your character - and that's usually good. That's what keeps readers on the edge of their seats.

Be creative. If there's nowhere convenient to hide, then your character has to think quickly. She has to be smarter. (So do you, the author, when it comes to that.) And if your character should need shelter, please don't let her stumble across a convenient tumble-down shack or have a friendly local offer her a bed in the hay shed. Instead, let her huddle under a tree with water dripping down her neck all night, not sleep a wink and then greet the day with a sore throat. That's SO much more satisfying.

3. CONVENIENT CONTACTS.

Your character needs to know how to crack a safe. Oh, wow, he thinks, Mary's brother spent two years in prison for robbery. He used to break into safes. I'll give him call. Naturally Mary's brother is home waiting for the call, and naturally he has just the knowledge that your character wants. (And is quite happy to pass it on - or help out.) Boring, boring, boring.

Make your character work for what he needs! If he DOES know someone (or know someone who knows someone who knows someone) then don't make it easy for him to get the information. Have the other person unavailable for four hours, or four days. Or perhaps (in the case of Mary's brother) he's helped out other felons once too often and he's back in prison.

Alternatively, your character's contact could be unwilling to help. Your character has to jump through hoops. Okay, once in a while he can have a lucky break - but mostly, he should have to fight for what he needs.

Nothing should be easy. (How many times have you sighed, saying "If only I knew someone who... [fill in the blanks]" only to give up and find a way around it? That's real life. Your books should reflect the obstacles we face in real life.)

4. CONVENIENT GADGETS/TOOLS/EQUIPMENT.

Hark back to the tomahawk I mentioned in the first point. Not only did the character know how to build a raft, he just happened to have a tomahawk with him to do the job. This is where your reader starts rolling eyes heavenwards and starts muttering "Oh, how convenient..."

Your character wants a pen? Yep, there's one in her pocket. Oh, and there's a scrap of paper there too. Phew, lucky! Your hero needs a rope? Well, isn't it fortunate there's one in the car. He needs a car? Gosh, someone's carelessly left the keys in one while they ducked into the store...

You can see the pattern here. Some authors treat their characters like spoilt children. Anything they need is instantly provided, whether they deserve it or not. Don't spoil YOUR characters. They need tough love. In order to grow and change, they need to work through their problems. They have to find inner strength to overcome obstacles, find what they need, or come up with an alternative if they can't have it.

As an author, you'll have to work harder, too - but it will be worth it. For a start, none of your readers will be muttering "Oh, how CONVENIENT!" when your characters want something... because you won't let them have it.

Will you?

Before You Start to Plot

By Marg McAlister

Here's a quick question for you: what's easiest to write - a 'woman in jeopardy' story or a police procedural?

If you are (or have been) a police officer, then 'police procedural' might be the answer for you. If you know nothing about police procedure, it would probably be the 'woman in jeopardy' story.

Let's extend this to other genres. Is it easier to write historical fiction or a contemporary novel? Science fiction, or a techno-thriller?

There's no right or wrong answer to these questions, of course. What is 'easier' depends on two things: (a) your level of expertise in the subject and (b) your willingness to do the necessary research. Obviously, if you're a scientist with a strong background in the solar system, black holes, quantum physics and the space-time continuum, you're probably going to find science fiction both easier and more interesting than someone who regularly scored an 'F' for science.

An Example of Why It Pays to Think About The Amount of Research

Most novels have an 'Acknowledgements' section in which the author thanks various people who helped bring the book to fruition. This section often gives you an insight into how much research the author has had to do in the course of developing the plot.

I browsed through a handful of books plucked at random from my shelves, and chose **Brad Meltzer's** *THE MILLIONAIRE* to show what I mean. I won't quote the entire 'Acknowledgements' section (which runs for three and a half pages) but I will quote enough to show you how you can get caught up in far more research than you ever expected.

Meltzer says: *"When I started this novel, it was the first time I had to step into a world that I knew absolutely nothing about. For that reason, I owe enormous thank-yous to the following people..."*

He goes on to thank various people for the following:

- teaching him investigative details, including dragging him through back alleys
- guiding him through the organization known as the Secret Service
- directing him through high-tech gadgetry
- making sure he had every banking detail he needed
- taking him backstage at Disney's Magic Kingdom
- teaching him how to track people down
- teaching him about financial crime and law enforcement
- guiding him through the intricacies of money laundering
- telling him about high-tech surveillance teams, and
- sharing expertise in the banking industry

Remember, Meltzer knew nothing about any of this before he started!

Countless authors can tell similar stories. What you have to decide, before you start to plot, is whether you have the time, patience and contacts to chase up all the information you need to make your story sound authentic. If you don't - opt for a simpler plot, and delve more deeply into characters and character development. Otherwise, you're likely to get halfway through your book and become hopelessly bogged down. You'll have wasted time, and your self-confidence will have taken a dive.

I'm not saying that you should not attempt a complex plot, or one that requires a lot of research. My advice to you is simply this: Consider whether you really want to do

everything necessary to make such a plot work. If you don't want to - or just don't have the time - then toss it out and start again. It's better to realise this at the beginning, than months into a project.

Being Sneaky - Introducing Villains and Clues

Marg McAlister

If there's one thing that really annoys readers of mysteries, it's being able to guess who the villain is by page 30. This happens for a variety of reasons, including:

- the author being so determined to 'play fair' that she makes it too obvious who the villain is
- the character being the only one who is even remotely likely to commit the crime
- the character being too 'saintly' to be true
- heavy-handed clues
- too much emphasis on why the hero thinks the villain couldn't be the perpetrator

Then there's the flip side of this: the villain who seems to finally become a suspect in the last chapter - for no good reason that the reader can see, other than the sleuth having some sort of psychic flash that makes them consider this person.

We all know that one of the 'rules' of mystery writing is that the villain (a) has to appear in the book reasonably early, and then (b) has to make at least a couple of appearances before the sleuth finally works out who it is. And yes - YOU, as the author, *do* need to make the sleuth work at this. It's okay to allow your sleuth to miss a few early clues, and then have things come together down the track - but the reader needs to be able to see the connection and agree that the sleuth has connected the dots in a logical way.

One of the best ways to see how it all works is to analyze a published book that works well. You can learn just as much by 'reading like a writer' as you can from poring over half a dozen 'how to' books on writing. So that's what we're going to do here: show you how one author introduced the villain early in the book, kept him 'on stage' for much of the time, provided clues for the sleuth and then brought it all together at the end.

Warning: spoiler coming up! The book I'm going to be using as an example is LOSING YOU by Nicci French (Penguin Books 2006). If you want to read this book without knowing the ending, stop reading now. Come back to this after you've read the book. On the other hand... you may find that it's just as intriguing to read the book knowing 'whodunit' from page 1, and studying the text to see how Nicci French 'hides' the villain in plain sight.

Setup: To let you know what the story is about, I'll simply quote the back-cover blurb:

"Nina Landry's birthday will be full of surprises - not all of them welcome. Nina is supposed to be taking her two children on holiday today with her new boyfriend. But the road away from the isolated winter bleakness of Sandling Island seems to be littered in obstacles, frustrating her plans at every turn.

Most pressingly of all, her fifteen-year-old daughter, Charlie, has yet to return from a night out... Minute by minute, as Nina's unease builds to worry and then panic, every mother's worst nightmare begins to unravel. Has Charlie run away? Or has something more sinister happened to her? And why will nobody take her disappearance seriously?

As day turns to night on the island and a series of half-buried secrets lead Nina Landry from sickening suspicion to deadly certainty, the question becomes less whether she and her daughter will leave the island for Christmas - and more whether they'll ever leave it again."

The action of the book takes place in less than 24 hours: the day of Nina's 40th birthday. This is also the day that she and her children (her daughter Charlie and her son Jackson) are supposed to fly off for a holiday. All plans have to be cancelled when Charlie fails to come home.

Nina knows that something terrible must have happened to Charlie, because she was looking forward to going on this trip - but she can't get the police to believe her and take action ("how long has she been missing? A couple of hours? And she's fifteen? I'd really give it a bit longer than that...").

As the day wears on Nina, searching for her daughter herself because she knows how crucial the first few hours of an investigation are, digs out facts that spur the police into action. Now let's move on to how Nicci French introduces the villain and the clues that enable Nina to put it all together (a lot faster than the police!) The villain, Rick, is introduced on the very first page. To be specific, in the second paragraph. Rick, is fixing Nina's car.

Rick is one of Charlie's teachers at the school. Nina likes him, and knows him well enough to ask him to help her with the car. Thus the reader is disarmed, and Nina has no suspicions of Rick whatsoever. In fact, as the book progresses she even leaves Jackson, her son, with Rick when she has to follow up her suspicions about someone else. As you can imagine, Rick shows up regularly as the plot unfolds, and it is only through unraveling the threads of Charlie's life that Nina is led slowly but surely to a certainty of Rick's involvement. This is how Rick is brought on the scene on the first page:

Sometimes I still felt that I had fetched up on the edge of the world. The wintry light slanting on to the flat, colorless landscape; the moan of the wind, the shriek of sea-birds and the melancholy boom of the foghorn far out at sea all sent a shiver through me. But I stamped my feet on the ground to warm them and told myself that in a few hours I would be far away. Rick dropped the spanner and straightened up from the open bonnet of the car. My car. He rubbed his grazed knuckle. His unshaven face was raw from the cold north-easterly that whipped over us, carrying the first drops of rain, and his pale blue eyes were watering. His curls were damp and lay flat on his head so I could see the shape of his skull.

He blew on his whitened fingers and tried to flash me his boyish smile, but I could see that it was an effort. "Rick," I said, "It's kind of you, but you don't need to do this. It was just a rattle in the engine and I thought something had come loose. I would never have called you otherwise. I can take it to the garage when we get back from holiday."

On page 4, we find out a little more about Rick and his place in the community when he tries to start the car and fails: "Rick pulled a face that was a caricature of confusion, anxiety and distress. This was what he did in life. He helped people, he fixed things; he was unflappably, charmingly capable. People turned to him, just as I had this morning."

Rick keeps working on the car, and on page 7 we find out even more about him - and about Charlie. (In the excerpt below, "Karen" is Rick's wife)

"I've been wanting to ask," Rick moved closer to me and spoke in a low tone, "how's Charlie doing now, Nina? Are things better?"

"I think so," I said cautiously. "You can't really tell. At least, I can't with Charlie. She's quite private, you know."

"She's a teenager," said Rick. "Teenagers are meant to be private. Especially with parents. Look at Eamonn, for Christ's sake."

"What's this?" asked Karen, moving in closer, a flicker of interest in her eyes.

"Charlie's had a rough time at school," I said. I didn't want to talk about this because it was Charlie's story, not mine. I didn't want to discuss it lightly, give it a trite meaning. I imagined Charlie's pale, truculent face, its look of withdrawal behind the turbulent fall of her reddish hair. "Rick found out about it. He talked to the girls who were bullying her, and to their parents. And to me. He was very helpful. As much as anyone can be."

"Girls can be cruel," said Karen, with a sweeping sympathy.

"She was at a sleepover at one of their houses last night," I said. "Tam's. Maybe that's a breakthrough. I haven't seen her yet. It would be a good way to end the term."

"She'll be fine, you know," said Rick, putting down his mug, reluctantly picking up the spanner once more. "Being bullied is horrible. Sometimes I think we forget how horrible it can be, how undermining. Especially if we're teachers, because we come to take it for granted, don't you think? But Charlie's a resilient young woman. Very bright, with a mind of her own and wide horizons. I always enjoy having her in my class. You should be proud of her."

At the end of the book, we realize that even while Rick is having this conversation, he knows that Charlie is tied up in one of the pillboxes left over from the island's defenses during the war. His words are intended to put Nina at ease and to remove all suspicion from himself - at a future date, Nina be able to testify that Rick was helping her with her car on the morning that Charlie disappeared.

How does Nina put two and two together to finally work out that Rick is involved? It's a long, hard process. There are plenty of other suspects (her ex-husband, who phones her (drunk) by page 10 to abuse her for taking his children out of the country; the girls who continued to bully Charlie, even at the sleepover the night before she disappeared; Joel, the

father of one of the bullying girls; Rick's rebellious son, Eamonn; and Charlie's secret boyfriend, Jay.

Nina starts by visiting the girls who were at the sleepover, and discovers that her daughter was still being bullied by these girls. A conversation with Charlie's best friend, Ashleigh, leads her to Jay. She convinces Jay to tell her where he and Charlie used to go, and makes him take her there. They discover a body - but not Charlie's; this one is of another girl who has been missing in another town. Nina discovers there is a link between her daughter and the dead girl - and eventually, that the common denominator is the teacher, Rick, who taught a windsurfing class that both girls attended.

None of this comes easily, and Nicci French is good at hiding clues. A tactic she uses is to bury the clue in a cluster of detail, so the reader misses it - but then, when they look back, the clue was there all the time.

Here's one example: Nina sees Rick coming downstairs in a heavy coat at her house. The house is full of people (invited by Charlie to celebrate Nina's 40th birthday as a surprise) and because Rick's wife Karen is on the stairs too, a bit tipsy, we are distracted from the clue. Here's the excerpt:

"Back in the house, the party showed no sign of coming to a close. Karen was half-way up the stairs now, swaying gently and trying to open another bottle of wine. Beneath her, Renata was being introduced to Sludge by Jackson, who still had the camcorder slung around his neck. Only Rick, coming down the stairs with his thick coat on, was mercifully making his way to the door.

"Escaping to your boat at last?" I said to him. "I don't blame you."

"The light starts to fail so early," he said. "This was a terrible idea of Charlie's, wasn't it?"

"Terrible. And she's not even here."

"If I see her, I'll give her an earful."

"Just tell her to come home. I'm going to chuck everyone out now."

"That was a quick party!"

"I've got things to do, Rick. Pack. Find my daughter. Catch a plane."

"Right. Well, then, I'll say - " He never got a chance to finish.

There was a yowl, and then a flying mass made up of black dog, a human figure or two and a terrible smashing of glass. Pieces fell and shattered on the hard floor. Sludge shot past me and up the stairs, a flash of whining black, and on the floor in front of us lay Karen and Renata, surrounded by a sudden silence. "Wow," said Jackson, and started to pull the camcorder into position, until I slapped down his arm."

This excerpt is significant for many reasons. Nina sees Rick on the stairs dressed in a heavy coat. At the time she sees this only as a sign that he's leaving (a welcome sign, although she likes Rick, because she wants everyone out of the house so she can finish packing and track down Charlie).

Later, when she starts to suspect Rick of being involved, she realizes that he is the one who has removed things from Charlie's room - and hidden them under his coat - to give the impression that she's run away (rather than being abducted). It is logical that he would be on the stairs because his wife Karen is a bit tipsy, and Rick would be trying to get her out of there.

The author has encouraged us to focus more on the fact that he was dressed to leave, 'mercifully making his way to the door', rather than the fact he was coming down the stairs. The author has immediately drawn attention away from Rick's presence on the stairs to the accident, when his wife Karen falls and breaks her arm.

Rick has to take Karen to the hospital. It will turn out that he has been thwarted from getting back to his victim, Charlie, all day because of various events - Nina asking for his help with the car; the surprise birthday party that Charlie has arranged; the need to take Karen to the hospital and stay there for some time, and then Nina asks him to look after Jackson for a while. All of these things actually keep Charlie alive.

We see that Jackson has been using the camcorder all morning to record their holiday preparations. This provides one of the clues, because later Nina's cousin, Renata, sees the footage and realizes that the things that Charlie was supposed to have taken are in full view on the camera - they were there before the party started, and gone when it ended. This later points to Rick.

Another example: Nina discovers that Joel, the father of one of the bullies and a man with whom she'd had a brief fling when he was separated from his wife, was one of those who had taught the windsurfing class. She immediately jumps to conclusions because he knew both girls, and she knows now that he's a bit of a philanderer.

She races off to confront him - only to find that he was far from being the only person who had taught the windsurfing class - and he hadn't even taught it the week that the girls had been there. Note that Rick is implicated here, but again the clue is nicely buried:

I turned on to the Saltings and drove past my house. A thought occurred to me. "If you weren't teaching that week, who would have taught her?"

"It's not like that," said Joel. "In the summer there are dozens of people teaching sailing, kayaking, windsurfing. Some of them belong to the yacht club. Some are just students hired for the summer. Some instructors come with their groups. Then people from the island help out as well. Lots of us, even if it's only for a day or so. Me, of course. Bill usually, but then boats are his business. Rick, though it's become a bit of an issue that Eamonn always refuses to join in. Tom occasionally, and some of the kids think it's a hoot when they find out he's the vicar. Even Alix has been known to rig a dinghy or two on weekends off. If you want to find the one who taught this girl, I wouldn't know where to start."

It would take too long to show all the twists and turns of the plot, and the various ways in which the author deflects attention from vital clues. Nicci French delivers plenty of plausible red herrings - including possessions of Charlie's found in Nina's ex-husband Rory's car although he'd denied seeing her.

It's well worth while reading the book to take note of how all this plays out. However, we'll finish with the moment of realization when Nina finally puts together all the clues. This is a long excerpt, but I'll reproduce it all here so you can see how the main character 'joins the dots':

I stood by the car with my back to the house, aware of Jackson still huddled inside, tired, hungry, wretched and scared. I gazed out at the sea, almost invisible in the dark, the frosty ground glinting beneath me, and smoking the cigarette. Olivia Mullen had come to see Charlie on the morning of Sunday, 12 September. I knew that from the date printed out on the photograph. I even knew the time: 11.07. According to the paper, that was the day she had gone missing. She had visited my daughter and then she had disappeared. And she had said she was going to 'finish it'.

Then - I took a huge drag at the cigarette and, for a moment, felt dizzy and sick. A story about Olivia's disappearance had been published this morning in the paper that Charlie was delivering, and Charlie had also disappeared. The two linked facts whirled in my brain: Olivia went missing after she'd visited Charlie. Charlie went missing when a story about her friend's disappearance was published. What else did I know?

I knew Charlie had been bullied and yesterday night had her drinks spiked by her so-called friends. I knew that she had a boyfriend, but had kept it secret for months, creeping out to assignations with him on the hulks. I knew she'd had a fling with Eamonn and had feared, or maybe known, that she was pregnant. I knew that Eamonn had told his father. I knew that someone had come into my house while the abortive party had been going on and taken things that belonged to Charlie, but that it couldn't have been Charlie. Why had they? This was after the bicycle had been abandoned half-way through the paper round. Could it have been as a decoy? To make it look as if Charlie had run away when she'd done no such thing?

Whoever had done it had only done it for show. They had only taken things that were visible, things whose absence would be noticed. I knew that Rory had been there this morning, secretly, and had met Charlie on her newspaper round, that he'd lied about it to me and then to the police, and only come clean when I'd discovered Charlie's things in the back of his car. I knew that Olivia and Charlie had met in the summer on a course that Joel had taught on. But so had dozens of others. There had been hundreds of them down by the beach, sailing and windsurfing.

"Hang on," I said under my breath, dropping the cigarette onto the ground where it glowed up at me, a winking red eye. "Wait."

Something had crept into my brain, a tiny wisp, like fog. What? I stared at the darkly glinting sea and tried to catch it. Yes: something about so many people coming to the beach that it was hard to keep track. Who'd said that? Who'd just said that?

"I never said the beach," I whispered aloud. "I never said Liv was connected to the beach."

Think. Think. Joel had said that many people from the island taught kayaking and sailing in the summer: himself, Alix, Rick, Bill, Tom... I remembered Rick's calm look, the sudden sense of composed purpose. Why would Rick be calm? What was his purpose? The waves licked at the shingle a few feet away from where I stood: a soft shucking sound. They gave me my answer: calm because the tide was rushing to the full flood and my time to find Charlie had all but run out. I opened the door and leaned in. "Jackson."

"Mummy? Can I - "

"What did Rick get when you went out with him?"

"What?" "Tell me what he got. You said a booklet."

I knew what he was going to say and he said it. "For the tides. When it's high and low."

I tore open the car's front locker and pulled out a pile of maps, service records and yes, a tide table. I opened it and followed with a finger the tides for Saturday, 18 December. Low tide was at 1.0.40 a.m.; high tide was at 4.22 a.m. and 5.13 p.m. Beside the day's times was a dotted black line, signifying that today's was a relatively high one. I glanced at the screen of my mobile: 16.56. Rick had left Charlie just before low tide, and had spent the whole day - with Karen at the hospital, with Jackson, of all people - being hampered from getting back.

But now, when the tide was up and the waves were lapping on the shore, he had relaxed. There was only fifteen minutes to go before it was at its highest. And Rick had been calm, knowing that. I pulled out my mobile and punched in the number of the police station. A familiar voice answered.

"This is - " I began, but then, with a start, I disconnected.

Because now I was thinking with complete clarity. I knew what would happen. The detectives would bring Rick in and would spend hours giving a statement, admitting nothing. And all the while the sea would be doing his work and everything would be lost. There were few certainties, but I was nearly sure that to call the police would be finally to lose any chance of finding Charlie.

"No," I said. I turned to Jackson. I took a breath and made my voice slow, calm, reassuring. "A change of plan, honey. You're going to have to wait for me in the house."

"No," he said, in a wail.

"It's important and I'm very proud of you, my darling."

"No!" he shouted, his voice high with hysteria. "I won't. I'll run away. I'll follow you. You can't leave me again. It's not fair." For a desperate stupid moment, I thought of taking him with me. He could hide on the back seat. He could stay quiet. He might fall asleep. I was considering it, even though at the moment I had no time. Then, somewhere out of my reverie, I saw two figures walking down the road, an adult and a child. The adult was laden with shopping bags, shuffling toward me. I saw that they had come from the bus stop. And then I recognized them: Bonnie and Ryan.

"Bonnie," I called, opening the door.

She recognized me and smiled. "We're all done," she said. "It took us five hours and we hardly had time to eat but we've got presents for everyone, haven't we, Ryan? In fact we were so busy examining them we missed our stop." Then her expression changed. "But weren't you supposed to be on your way to Florida by now? Nina, you look terrible."

"No time," I said. "An emergency. The biggest emergency. You've got to take Jackson again. I'm so sorry. Charlie's missing."

"Missing?"

"No time. Take Jackson. I'll phone. Jackson, out. Quick."

"But -" said Jackson.

"Great!" said Ryan.

"Right," said Bonnie immediately, dragging Jackson out by his forearms. Then she looked at me. "Go."

I sped away as she slammed the door, driving back from the direction I'd just come. When I was a few yards from Rick's house, I drew to a halt. I switched off my headlights but kept the engine running. And I waited, praying that I wasn't too late, praying that I hadn't got it wrong, praying that I had and that in the nightmare of fear I had simply concocted a Gothic tale that had no roots in truth. This was my gamble, my one last throw of the dice. I was risking the life of my daughter on the chance I was right.

I knew now that Rick had taken Charlie. I believed that he had hidden her somewhere that would be covered by the tide, which was now almost at its height. And I was staking everything on the hope that he was still at his house and that he would now go to her and I would be able to follow and stop him. Such a frail vessel in which to place all my faith.

Rick does emerge from the house, Nina follows him and, after losing sight of his tail-lights for a short time, finally comes across his car. At this stage she DOES do the right thing and phones the police - which is a relief! Too many mysteries have been ruined by the main

character not achieving the right balance between independent action and pure foolhardiness. Here is how this section of the novel plays out:

I switched off the engine and sat still. I looked round, expecting his face to appear at the window. There was no sign of any movement. Outside was just blackness.

I picked up my mobile and found the police-station number. When it was answered I didn't ask to be put through to anyone. That would take too long. I just said, in a voice as calm as I could manage so they wouldn't think I had flipped into a florid state of hysteria, "This is Nina Landry. I have found my daughter but she is in great danger. Come immediately to the end of Lost Road. Turn left where it meets the coastal road and drive as far as you can. Where the road ends, you'll find two cars. We're there. Come at once. Have you got that? End of Lost Road, turn north toward the causeway. It is urgent. Urgent. Life and death. Send an ambulance." I ended the call. Was there anything in the car I could use?

The ending: Nina arms herself with the car jack, comes across Rick and hits him. She does find her daughter, who is almost under water, and even though Rick comes after her again, manages to save Charlie's life - only just, because she is so wet and cold that life almost shuts down.

To Sum Up:

This article gives you an insight into how just one author went about introducing the villain, and how she planted clues so the heroine finally worked out who it was - and how she might, with one last desperate throw of the dice, get her daughter back. I can't recommend strongly enough that you develop the habit of reading like a writer.

Every time you read a book that surprises and delights you with its plot twists and clever structure, take notes. Learn from the best teachers: writers who have made it work so well that you can't put the book down.

Whose Story Is It?

by Marg McAlister

Whenever you sit down to plot a story (or even to think about a story) one of the first things you have to ask yourself is this: "*Whose story IS it?*"

It seems like a simple question - but your story can succeed or fail depending on how you handle this. Told from the wrong point of view, a story can founder before the first chapter has come to an end.

SOME COMMON PROBLEMS

1. IN CHILDREN'S STORIES: The author can't help but identify with the adult point of view. The story is told from a fond or patronizing standpoint - all too obviously that of a mother or teacher. The young reader picks this up instantly. Why? Because we all 'become'

the viewpoint character in a story. Children don't feel comfortable looking out through adult eyes - especially if there's a too-obvious moral 'message' being delivered!

2. A SECONDARY CHARACTER TAKES OVER: if your main character seems dull and lifeless, perhaps you are telling the story from the wrong person's viewpoint. Do you find yourself eagerly sitting down to write scenes shown through the eyes of a vibrant or cheeky 'supporting cast' member, but rushing through the scenes that star the lead character? Uh oh. Dangerous... it's time for a rethink. Quite often this is a good sign that it is really someone else's story.

3. THE STORY PLODS ALONG: All your writing seems like hard work. The plot seems fine - when you analyze it, it follows the 'recipe' that should work: the main character has a problem or goal that is important to him; he faces a series of obstacles while trying to reach his goal; he experiences a time when all seems lost - then he triumphs and/or realizes that something else is more important to him, and all is resolved. So what's wrong?

"What's wrong" is usually that although the main character has a goal that's important to him, it hasn't convinced you, the author! YOU don't care. Therefore it's going to be hard to persuade your readers to care.

Look at the other people in the story. What goals/problems do they have? What is important to them? Could you get a lot more involved if you were telling someone else's story?

SOME FINAL TIPS:

- Decide whose story it is. If it isn't working from one character's viewpoint, write the same scene of action from several viewpoints. Do this several times until you find the one that feels right.
- If you have more than one viewpoint in the story, make sure that we know at the beginning of each scene whose eyes we are looking through. Make sure you don't run off at a tangent, getting too involved in a secondary character's story. All scenes and all subplots should be interwoven with the MAIN character's story, and move it forward.
- In each scene, the viewpoint character should be the one with the most at stake for that scene. The main viewpoint character for the story should be the one with the most at stake for the story.
- Every viewpoint character must be actively involved in the plot all the way through. Don't waste a scene by allowing someone who appears only once or twice to be the viewpoint character.

The right viewpoint for your story is essential to first grab your reader, then to carry her along. Take the time to get it right.

How to Avoid Viewpoint Slips

by Marg McAlister

Sit back, and imagine what it feels like to be you. Now that shouldn't be too hard - you've lived in your own skin for a long time.

- Do you feel happy or sad?
- Do you feel on edge or relaxed?
- Do you feel tired or energetic?
- Do you feel angry or calm?

Now think about how you know these things.

You have various bodily symptoms that accurately represent your feelings. "Happiness" feels light and contented. You might be sitting there quietly humming a tune. You might be suffused with a quiet feeling of well being.

"Sadness" is different. If you're sad, the world suddenly seems a grey, cheerless place. There's a heaviness in your chest, and maybe even a silent cry of despair that you're aching to let go. Perhaps you have a lump in your throat from trying to hold back the tears; trying to keep a stiff upper lip.

That's what it FEELS like to be you when you're happy or sad.

Now imagine you're going to nip across into someone else's body for a moment. Someone standing across the room looking at you. How can that person tell that you're happy?

They might see a slight smile tugging at the corners of your mouth. You just can't help showing your happiness. They can hear you humming softly. Your eyes sparkle. Your voice sounds upbeat and happy.

How might they know if you're sad? They can't, after all, FEEL that heavy weight in your chest. They can't know that you're so, so close to letting out a wail of despair. They can't know about that lump in your throat.

But they know you're sad. They can see the dullness in your eyes; the slump in your posture. They might be able to detect a quiver in your lips as you try not to cry. They can hear the despair or flatness in your voice.

In short: you, the viewpoint character, know what it FEELS like to be you. You're looking at the world from the inside.

The onlooker can put together information only from what they can SEE. They're looking at you from the outside.

1. Reap the Benefits of Deep Viewpoint

Every writer wants readers to become deeply immersed in the characters they invent. In effect, when someone reads, they 'become' the main person in the scene. The deeper inside that person's viewpoint you can help the reader go, the more convinced the reader is that this character is 'real'.

The easiest way to achieve this reader identification is to help them experience what it feels like to be that person - not to tell the reader by looking on from the outside.

2. Some Examples: (1) In Deep POV And (2) As An Onlooker

Here are a few examples to help you remember the difference.

1. HAPPINESS. In deep POV: a surging feeling of joy or quiet happiness; a desire to smile at everyone you see; talking to people with a smile on your face. The onlooker sees: a cheerful face; a ready laugh; a light, quick walk; humming or whistling a happy tune.

2. ANGER. In deep POV: your chest feels as though it might burst with fury; you breathe in short gasps; you want to punch or hurt someone; you feel like bursting into tears of rage; you feel the blood rush to your head. The onlooker sees: eyes glaring; a red face; lips thinning, words uttered in haste or a shout; a punch being thrown, objects being tossed aside; an aggressive stance (hands on hips).

3. What About Describing A Character's Features?

This is where a lot of writers run into trouble. Torn by the need to 'show' the reader what a character looks like, they hop in and out of the main character's mind at dizzying speed.

If you start out in a character's mind, it's best to stay there for the duration of the scene. (Yes, I know there is debate in literary circles about this, and there always will be. What you have to decide is what is best for your character.)

Why is it best to stay in your character's mind? The single most important reason is that your reader will identify more closely with your character. They more or less become that person. (Well, they will if you write well enough!)

At this point I'll return to what it feels like to be you. That's where we started, remember? You're the only one who knows what it really feels like to live in your skin and in your mind. That's what you need to aim for when it comes to your character. Become that person!

Therefore, if you are living inside that person's skin, then you can't know what he/she looks like from the outside. (Not unless your character walks around with a hand-held mirror all the time. And is vain enough to keep looking into it.)

So... resist the temptation to write something like this:

Viv sat on the rocks, her hazel eyes on the gulls swooping down at the water. It was decision time. Should she go with Chris's squad or not? He was dynamic and encouraging. His team would do anything for him. But he didn't get the same results as Blake. Blake could reduce her to tears with his scathing comments, true - but she knew it was all so she'd dig deep for that extra bit of effort that would earn her the win. She sighed, and ran her fingers through her short blonde hair. It would be a heck of a lot easier if someone would just tell her what to do. Idly, she tossed another rock into the lapping waves, not realizing that the frown on her face made her look exactly like her mother in one of her uncompromising moods.

Have you picked out the parts that pull the reader out of Viv's body, thus giving the impression of an 'onlooker' present? There are three.

1. **"...her HAZEL eyes..."**. Viv can't see the colour of her own eyes - only an onlooker would be able to see that. Nor is she likely to be thinking about the colour of her eyes at a time like this. By mentioning the colour, you make the reader aware that 'someone else' is in the scene looking AT Viv, rather than 'being' her.

2. **"...and ran her fingers through her short BLONDE hair."** It's entirely possible that she would be able to feel that her hair is short while she performs this action (although it's not likely she'd be thinking about it) but she can't see the colour of her hair. If she had **long** hair, and the wind was blowing it in front of her eyes, you could perhaps say 'she brushed aside the strands of blonde hair blowing in her eyes'.

3. **"...not realizing that the frown on her face made her look exactly like her mother in one of her uncompromising moods"**. Ugh. This structure is B-A-D! For a start, the author has written '...not realizing that...'. If she doesn't realize it, then it's not in her mind at all - so why mention it? And there is no way that Viv can know that the frown on her face is making her look like her mother in one of her moods. Very clumsy!

If you want to show what a character looks like, do it later in a scene from someone else's viewpoint. If someone is looking at Viv, they would be able to see things like the colour of her hair and eyes and the way her frown makes her look like her mother. But Viv can't see these things herself... so if you want to stay deep inside her skin, don't fall into the trap of showing them.

And that will make you a better writer.

Does Your Fight Scene Pack a Punch?

by Marg McAlister

Long ago, movie directors mastered the technique of creating a convincing fight scene. Bodies crash to the floor.. chairs are upended... viewers are treated to closeups of terrified or furious faces... and the punches thrown are enough to make us wince and close our eyes. (No more of those prissy punches that fooled nobody in the early films - sneaky camera angles to hide the fact that the fist didn't really connect; loud thuds to suggest a knockout punch when anybody could see it wouldn't knock a gnat out of its flight path.)

Movie-goers are treated to multiple camera angles and sophisticated sound effects. We feel as though we're right in the middle of that fight.

Authors have it a lot harder. How can you throw the reader in the middle of the scene and feel every punch? How can you show the action without falling into the trap of sounding like a school kid enthusiastically detailing a fight, punch by punch; kick by kick?

There are just two things to keep in mind.

1. Remember you're a writer, not a choreographer.
2. Pack your fights with EMOTIONAL punch.

That's it. So simple - yet so effective.

What does a choreographer do? Plans a series of movements, step by step. He/she teaches the people performing the movements how to perform each one, and then how to put them together into a smooth routine.

Too many fight scenes in books look like a choreographer's notebook. You'll see something like this:

Briggs planted a right hook on Smith's chin. The other man reeled backwards, his arms windmilling. Briggs followed up his advantage, breathing hard. In quick succession he landed several more punches on Smith's body.

Smith fell to the ground and rolled away. "Bastard!" he grunted, and rolled again to avoid a well-aimed kick from Briggs. Cat-like, he leapt to his feet and circled Briggs, not taking his eyes off his nemesis.

"Come on!" Briggs taunted, darting in to land another punch then ducking back out of reach. "Is that the best you can do?" He feinted and laughed.

Infuriated, Smith attacked. Briggs danced back and around Smith, and in two deft moves had him on the ground, one arm up behind his back.

"Had enough?" he panted.

There are so many things wrong with the above scene it's hard to know where to start. In brief:

- We have no idea who the viewpoint character is. We seem to be looking on from a distance. That means there is very little emotional involvement from the reader. To really involve your reader, do everything you can to make sure he or she 'becomes' the viewpoint character. If he gets hurt, so does the reader. If he loses... so does the reader.
- The writer is "telling" rather than showing. A did this then B did that so A did this in response and B followed up with this... boring! (Can you see the choreographer at work?)
- The writer uses the characters' names a lot: "Smith" and "Briggs". This tends to add distance too. The problem is that both characters are men, so constant use of "he", while not so distancing, can be confusing. It's easier to avoid these problems if you are deeply in the viewpoint of one of the characters.
- The excerpt is filled with tired old expressions such as "in quick succession he landed two more punches"; "a well-aimed kick"; "cat-like, he leapt to his feet"; "in two deft moves". Expressions like this save the writer from doing much work - they roll off the tongue so easily because they've been around for so long.

How do you avoid these pitfalls and write a fight scene that works?

You forget (for the most part) the physical punches and add emotional punch. Get deep into the viewpoint of one of the characters - preferably the main character; the one the reader really identifies with. This way, readers look out through the eyes of that character. They desperately want him to win; they feel every punch. Therefore, there's a lot more emotional investment in the outcome of the fight.

Most writers seem to feel that fight scenes have to be filled with fast movement, grunts and moans and shouted epithets to telegraph the action. They feel that if you stop to tell the reader what's going on in the head of the main character, this slows things down too much.

That certainly can be the case... but in the hands of a skilled writer, tension actually builds when the action is slowed down. You need to remember that time-on-the-page is not the same as real time. Since you can't actually show the reader what is going on in real time as you can in a movie, you have to compensate by spending some time in the mind of the main character. Show us the character's thoughts. Show us the character's emotions. Help us to "feel" our way into the fight.

The easiest way to show how this works is to use an example from a published book. Here's a fight scene from **ECHO BURNING** by **Lee Child** (Bantam Press, 2001). The hero, Jack Reacher, tries to avoid the fight... and the tension builds beautifully until he is forced into a confrontation.

The guy was wearing a white tank-top shirt and he was eating chicken wings. The wings were greasy and the guy was a slob. He was dripping chicken fat off his chin and off his fingers onto his shirt. There was a dark teardrop shape right between his pecs. It was growing and spreading into an impressive stain. But the best bar-room etiquette doesn't let you linger on such a sight, and the guy caught Reacher staring.

"Who you looking at?" he said.

It was said low and aggressively, but Reacher ignored it.

"Who you looking at?" the guy said again.

Reacher's experience was, they say it once, maybe nothing's going to happen. But they say it twice, then trouble's on the way. Fundamental problem is, they take a lack of response as evidence that you're worried. That they're winning. But then, they won't let you answer, anyway.

"You looking at me?" the guy said.

"No," Reacher answered.

"Don't you be looking at me, boy," the guy said.

The way he said boy made Reacher think he was maybe a foreman in a lumber mill or a cotton operation. Whatever muscle work was done around Lubbock. Some kind of a traditional trade passed down through the generations. Certainly the word cop never came to his mind. But then he was relatively new to Texas.

"Don't you look at me," the guy said.

Reacher turned his head and looked at him. Not really to antagonize the guy. Just to size him up. Life is endlessly capable of surprises, so he knew one day he would come face to face with his physical equal. With somebody who might worry him. But he looked and saw this wasn't the day. So he just smiled and looked away again.

Then the guy jabbed him with his finger.

"I told you not to look at me," he said, and jabbed.

It was a meaty forefinger and it was covered in grease. It left a definite mark on Reacher's shirt.

"Don't do that," Reacher said.

The guy jabbed again.

"Or what?" he said. "You want to make something out of it?"

Reacher looked down. Now there were two marks. The buy jabbed again. Three jabs, three marks. Reacher clamped his teeth. What were three greasy marks on a shirt? He started a slow count to ten. Then the guy jabbed again, before he even reached eight.

"You deaf?" Reacher said. "I told you not to do that."

"You want to do something about it?"

"No," Reacher said. "I really don't. I just want you to stop doing it, is all."

The guy smiled. "Then you're a yellow-bellied piece of shit."

"Whatever," Reacher said. "Just keep your hands off me."

"Or what? What are you going to do?"

Reacher restarted his count. Eight, nine.

"You want to take this outside?" the guy asked.

Ten.

"Touch me again and you'll find out," Reacher said. "I warned you four times."

The guy paused a second. Then, of course, he went for it again. Reacher caught the finger on the way in and snapped it at the first knuckle. Just folded it upward like he was turning a door handle. Then because he was irritated he leaned forward and head-butted the guy full in the face. It was a smooth move, well-delivered, but it was backed off to maybe half of what it might have been. No need to put the guy in a coma, over four grease marks on a shirt. He moved a pace to give the man room to fall, and backed into the woman on his right.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said.

The woman nodded vaguely, disoriented by the noise, concentrating on her drink, unaware of what was happening. The big guy thumped silently on the floorboards and Reacher used the sole of his shoe to roll him half onto his front. Then he nudged him under the chin with his toe to pull his head back and straighten his airway. The recovery position, paramedics call it. Stops you choking while you're out.

Then he paid for his drinks and walked back to his motel...

Of course, this scene just shows a quietly escalating fight and it shows a hero who has the ability to take a fight to a quick conclusion. You're going to have to use a slightly different approach if you have several people involved and if you have a fast and furious fight with two more evenly matched aggressors. But the principle is the same.

Don't let the reader watch the fight from a distance. Get them into the skin of the main character, privy to his thoughts and his emotions. Let readers feel the impact of fists and feet; let them experience the adrenaline (or irritation, depending on the level of provocation). Then your fight scenes will pack the kind of punch you want.

Scenes and Structure

by Marg McAlister

Beginning writers often tend to think of a book as a series of chapters. It's actually more useful to regard it as a series of linked scenes. Why? Because it makes it a lot easier to control the pace of your story.

'Pace' may be described as the forward movement of your story. Sometimes it will move at a slower pace than at other times. What you need to aim for is a story that moves along fast enough to maintain reader interest, but not at such breakneck speed that the reader doesn't have time to get to know the characters or assimilate the plot. Nor do you want your story to slow down too much. That can lead to your reader closing the book. (If that reader happens to be the editor to whom you hope to sell the story, you're in big trouble.)

Scenes that contain a lot of action or conflict tend to elevate the reader's blood pressure. They have her whipping through the pages, anxious to absorb every moment of the drama being played out. A novel full of such scenes:

1. is too tiring to read for hours at a stretch and
2. sees the overall effect of each scene diminished so the entire novel loses punch.

None of us can put up with constantly high stress levels without burning out!

A book that moves at too rapid a pace is like a movie packed with one action scene after another-it's all too much. To appreciate and enjoy the conflict when it happens (in a nail-biting kind of way) we need periods of calm between the storms. These alternating scenarios can be regarded as scenes and their sequels.

The scene involves the main characters in action and/or conflict. It usually contains dialogue. Picture it as a scene from a movie - lights, camera, ACTION!

Following such a scene, you give your reader a chance to breathe, by moving into the sequel. The sequel is the logical aftermath of the scene. In the sequel, the viewpoint character has time to think about what has just happened, what it means to him/her, and what he/she intends to do next. By planning your novel as a series of scenes and sequels, you can control the pace.

Want to slow things down? Expand the sequel, the 'calm' period, which gives the character (and the reader) 'time out'.

Want to speed things up? Shorten the sequel. For example:

'By the time Marianne reached her apartment, she was good and mad. There was no way she intended to let Jake Rockford get away with a pathetic story like that! Five minutes after walking through her front door, she was dialling the Rockford's number. Within half an hour, she was pulling up in her sister's driveway, ready to do battle.'

In just a few lines, you have pitchforked the reader into the next action-packed scene. We know that Marianne doesn't believe Jake's story. We know she's eager to confront Julie and/or Jake. And we haven't wasted any time getting her there: one scene leads very quickly into the next, thus keeping the story moving along at a smart clip.

Learn to use scene and sequel effectively, and you retain control over the pacing of your novel. At all times the paramount question in your mind should be: How will this scene advance the story? If the answer is 'I don't know' or 'It won't, really' - then out it goes, no matter how well-written it is.

The Structure Of A Scene

The viewpoint character in each scene should have a goal.

Why? So you don't include scenes that go nowhere and achieve nothing. Scenes that bog your story down.

These are the things you should take into consideration when planning a scene:

1. What is the viewpoint character's goal?

- What does he want at the outset of the scene?
- How will the action in the scene help him to get what he wants?
- Is the scene goal relevant to the viewpoint character's main goals in life? (Either work or private)
- Will the reader worry about whether the viewpoint character will get what he wants?

2. What is the source of conflict?

- What complications will arise to prevent your character from achieving her goal(s)?
- How will your character try to overcome these problems?
- Will the readers worry about whether the character will achieve her goal(s)?

3. Does your scene end dramatically?

- Is the viewpoint character better off or worse off at the end of the scene?
- If he is better off, have you introduced (or foreshadowed) a new plot twist to maintain tension? (Never make things too easy for your main character.)
- Has the scene moved the story forward?
- Has the scene left the reader wanting to know what will happen next?
- Have you answered the question you set up in the reader's mind at the beginning of the scene? (For example: will Character get what he wants? How will he go about getting what he wants?)

4. Have you planned the scene's sequel?

- Have you had the character think about what has just happened?
- Have you had the character decide what to do next to pursue her goal?
- Have you had the character take action or make a decision that moves us into the next scene?