

Write-by-the-Lake Writer's Workshop and Retreat, June 15-19, 2009
Session #8: I Can't Put it Down! Pacing: the tools for creating a page-turning novel

Create literary insomnia with five days of techniques to keep your readers up all night. Concepts, characters, scenes, plot, action, and even internalization, emotion, motivation and dialogue—every angle of your book works together to make up pacing! The art of pacing is not just about high-speed and action scenes. Excellent pacing involves a clear process of storytelling that also surprises, deepens, shocks, and even slows at times to keep the reader turning to read “just the next page.”

And here's how we'll figure it all out...

Syllabus

Monday: Kick Your Story to the Next Level

If you're excited about your story, your reader will be too. Where do you start? How do you come up with a big idea? If you have one, how do you make it more powerful? We'll look at your novel (or get ideas for the one you want to write) and turn it into a page-turning concept. Today you will discover or tune your dynamic high concept and riveting story premise. Both will pave the way to a can't-put-it-down novel. As an added bonus, you will uncover the core of your story and give a spine-tingling answer to the question, “So what's your book about?”

Create a Dynamic High-Concept (The Big Idea)

- Elements of a dynamic high-concept
- The high-concept that dazzles and how to fix one that doesn't

Build a Riveting Premise (The Idea, Fleshed Out)

- Components of a riveting premise and how to sustain its excitement throughout your book
- Identify the strengths of your story—punch them up
- Seek out any story weaknesses and find solutions
- Using the premise to identify and begin building the spine of your book

Maximum Impact: The All-Important Opening Scene

- The hook: how to make it count past page one
- Components of a great opening scene (you don't need to start with an explosion or car chase)
- Scene goals and how to use them to deepen, tighten, and accelerate your story
- Don't do this! Red flags that will cause a reader (and editor) to put your book down

Sharpen with Page-Turning Prose

- Tips on how to keep your own voice while perfecting a page-turning writing style

Pace Your Way to Publication: Bonus Marketing Mini-Lesson

How to use your dynamic high-concept and riveting premise for query letters and pitches

***Homework:** One or two-line premise and your back cover copy (or in literary terms, the short synopsis). In addition, up to 4 pages of the opening scene of your book, including the hook.*

Tuesday: Create Compelling Characters, and Use their Motivations to Drive Your Book

A bold, multi-dimensional fictional cast and fascinating protagonist will compel people to keep reading to find out what happens to these characters they love. How do you create them and flesh them out into “real” people? How do you make them larger-than-life? Great characters and their flaws and motivations drive your story. A page-turner has internal and external plot meshed together, and these come from the characters in your book. Today you’ll discover everything you need to write the kind of characters to drive your page-turner.

Protagonist

Larger-Than-Life: A memorable protagonist and the desires s/he needs to drive your novel

Go deeper: motivation and character flaws to increase tension and conflict

And deeper still: find your character’s core internal issues and use them to move your story

Developing the Character Emotional Arc

Why and how it will make or break your novel

Character introspection: how much is enough and how much is too much?

Strong Secondary Characters: A Cast that won’t Quit

Characters who matter: use archetypes for story elements to deepen your book

Tools to build firm character foundations: Charts/Grids/Interviews/Psychoanalysis and beyond

Fast and furious characterizations that work

***Homework:** Complete a character development arc and motivational grid for your protagonist and write an essential scene revealing part of his/her character or motivation.*

Wednesday: Build for Maximum Story Effect

What is the difference between story and plot? How do you keep the momentum going and avoid the sagging middle? There are so many plot structures out there, which should you use; any, all, none? Make up your own? Where do twists come, do you plot them, or will they just “happen?” Today you’ll dig deeper, think in broader terms, and learn to recognize and tighten your story. Plotter or not, you’ll discover tools that work with your personal method of writing.

The Essence of Your Whole Story

Build a spine (the focus and strength for your story) that grabs readers and won’t let go

Elements of a provocative story question; how not to lose sight of the story problem or goals

Conflict and dilemma: build-in suspense for your structure

Constructing and Tightening: Plot and Structure

Creating and weaving together the facets of plot: Emotional/Internal Arc and External Action

The art of building “real” conflict that keeps your internal and external throughlines energized

Choosing subplots and action that strengthen story problem instead of slowing it down

Recognize and fill story sags and holes so your reader (and you) don’t fall in

How and when to twist your plot (and give twists the resonance readers crave)

Tools for plotting: Chapter Grid/Storyboarding/3-Act Structure/Put together your own!

Scene, Sequel and Sequence

Writing the “big” moments, using only the narrative you need

Scene goal and the emotional core of the scene

Characters and their scene goals aimed at conflict and tension

Sequence, transitions and using sequel to connect, move, and pace

Pace Your Way to Publication: Bonus Marketing Mini-Lesson

Tips on how to write your compelling synopsis

***Homework:** A big-moment scene, or a 3-5 page synopsis, or a detailed outline and backbone of your story's structure*

Thursday: The Heart and Emotional Power of a Page-Turner

Dilemma, theme, subtext and foreshadowing are probably the most difficult aspects of writing to pin down, but once done, they make up the emotional core of your story. Where does theme (the heart of your book) come from and can you plan it, or does it grow from the conflict and story? What about dilemma, and how do you sustain it throughout the entire book? And subtext? What is it and how do you plan it without making it seem contrived? Today we'll dig so deep, we'll strike the gold of your story!

The Power of Dilemma

Story, scene, and character dilemma

Prolonging agony and making the choice impossible

How and when to use dilemma (always!) for pacing

Theme Beats the Underlying Pulse that Keeps Your Story ALIVE!

What theme really means, what it does, how it helps you pace

Tightening the story through central theme and character values

Dynamic themes and the steps you need to find or build them

Overall story and using theme to pace not only the internal struggle, but external plot

Conflict in theme: primary vs. contradictory values

Subtext and Foreshadowing: Pacing Beneath the Surface

Subtext: Making deep-meaning description, action, and dialogue work as a pacing tool

Voice, language, metaphor: give your pacing control

***Homework:** A scene showing the protagonist in deep story dilemma, where s/he chooses and everything gets worse (you can't resolve anything until the end) OR the big, black-moment, all-is-lost scene, OR a scene where a character's emotion (i.e. anger, misery, fear) is held deep inside but the subtext defines their internal struggle.*

Friday: The Finish Line: Putting It Together to Make It All Work

What about the parts of writing that are necessary: the description, backstory, setting. Do they really stall out a story? How can you use them without slowing everything down? Today you'll work on putting the pieces together and weaving the details in to make your story richer, more compelling, and the pacing even tighter.

Dialogue, Setting, Description and Backstory

Get more out of your dialogue (the most versatile and hard-working tool in your toolbox)

Using description to characterize, add tension, even conflict, and sculpt the mood of your story

How to activate your description and use it as a pacing tool

Setting as action and character, influencing the story and outcome

Use backstory to deepen and complicate problems and develop inner conflict

More Tips and Tricks of Pacing

A checklist of pacing techniques

Endings

Surprising, yes...inevitable, of course...but how to keep 'em guessing until the end

Steps to constructing a finale that resonates with readers long after the book is back on the shelf

Above all, don't let the reader down. Red flags to avoid.

Revision Process

How to see structure and pacing through all those words!

The process to recognize and fix (or delete) the boring parts readers skip

Close up editing: Checklist to tighten and then tighten some more

Bonus Marketing Mini-Lesson: Pace Your Way to Publication

Elements of a can't-put-it-down Novel query package

What you need before you send your manuscript out to agents and editors

Homework for the rest of your life: Go forth and conquer! And don't forget to send me the next 20 pages. This can consist of manuscript pages, but feel free to include query letters and synopsis if you so desire.

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others' work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five to 10 pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.