

Paul Magrs: 'time has to move. Begin with events and keep them moving. This sounds obvious, but it doesn't always occur to people. They think they can hold back time and explain everything to us at great length...Time has to move. Keep it moving and fold all the info we need into the mix – but don't explain too much. Don't get mired down.'

From *Short Circuit* Pg 208 (Salt Publishing, 2009).



We can think of plot and pacing as intertwined. They are the way a writer manipulates time in order to engage the reader with the story. The writer can shuffle around the sequence of events, expand or contract them, speed things up and slow things down (duration) delay outcomes (creating suspense) move forwards and backwards between past present and future to sew hints or information, display character in action, or draw parallels (time-shift). They can revisit events with hindsight, play brinkmanship with which future is about to reveal itself. They can hide clues about the past or the future in the details of the present moment (prefiguring). Crime fiction is above everything else fiction about the drama of time. The writer controls how the reader enters and leaves the story, or negotiates changes in time as the story unwraps and transitions between time-zones. Story structure sets up expectations (of triggering event, rising action, crisis, change). These expectations are experienced as anticipation, the lure of questions that we want answered, and freshened by the use of surprise. In other words, we are pulled along by the hook of what time will reveal and the recognition of mutability. Writers are time lords!



Time is *experienced* - therefore it's bound up with consciousness, and consciousness with point of view. Think of the great modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, who broke with traditional narration to explore how the individual actually experiences time and creates personal reference points around which to organise that experience. And famously, James Joyce pioneered 'stream of consciousness' technique where the narrative appears to record the unbroken flow of a character's thoughts without any evidence of intervention or selection by the author- a technique that has its routes in dramatic monologue and soliloquy.

Such devices have the effect of slowing time right down – a single moment can be filled with memories, interruptions, digressions, rumination...But slowing time in a narrative needs to be a purposeful device. In more traditional narration it can hold up the action if you allow a character to feed us a lot of information in the form of summary, show us every minor action (like crossing a room to open a door), or letting the character ruminate on recent events inside their head. You will clog the flow of the story and turn off your reader. You need to ask if every detail is really necessary, if there are more dramatic ways to feed information in real time, such as through dialogue. Let the reader eavesdrop on a conversation that's full of clues and subtext – pique their instinctive curiosity. Your aim is to manipulate time according to the needs of the story. So decide what can be skipped over quickly, what is just a distraction, what is important and needs to be slowed down, expanded, so the reader can fully dwell in those significant moments. This is at the heart of pacing.

Some notes on time and poetry.

Poetry more than any other literary form plays with the musical devices of pattern, rhythm, repetition and sonic echo. These effects, coupled with line-breaks, mean the experience of time is deeply embedded in the experience of poetry. There is an ongoing movement and change from line to line and stanza to stanza coupled with regular points of return (to a refrain, a rhyme, a beat, an image). The moments of return, or repetition, are coloured by the forward moving narrative or flow of thought, so their significance is slightly different each time and accumulative in effect. The reader experiences anticipation, and the pleasure of familiarity and surprised mixed together. The villanelle is a wonderful example of this characteristic in action. We'll take a look at one in class.