

## Heads Will Roll: Simple Rules for Character Action

"Off with his head!" the Queen cried. Many writers follow the Queen's advice when describing character movements, forgetting that the head, and other body parts, are attached and must work together if such description is to succeed. Statements like 'His eyes dropped to the floor' or 'Tom tossed his head at Paul' force the reader into a double take as she visualizes the action, robbing her of enjoyment in the picture thus created, except perhaps the humorous kind - and as writers, we definitely don't want that response!

Loosely portraying character action in a story is a writer's way of avoiding the work of actual description by relying on cliché and common visual images to convey the picture to the reader. The impulse to slack off and slide over the surface of such depictions is strong, because the writer is working with a subject that every reader knows well, i.e., physical action. It's tempting to leave such work to the reader's imagination, saying to oneself, "Hey, we all have bodies; we all do this or that action; they know what I'm talking about, and I'm not going to bother describing it."

But 'show, don't tell' doesn't mean this kind of lazy narration. Leaning on common images and expecting the reader to take the extra step that the writer isn't providing is to refuse to construct writing that is clearer and more active, denying the writer's ability to construct a crisper visualization of the scene and the characters within it. The most difficult and most crucial work a writer can do is to clearly describe familiar subjects in innovative and creative ways. And aside from denying the reader's needs, too much of such writing can also convince an editor that you really don't know how to write, and she won't hire you.

There are several rules for creating tightly woven character action. One is not to describe body parts doing things that they can't do, i.e., 'Smith's head fell to the table.'

Heads do not fall to tables without some help from other body parts. As a reader I wonder whether the head in question rolls around and falls off onto the floor. The image is ludicrous and affords a good deal of entertainment, but that's certainly not the response the writer wants!

The problem here is with the verb. 'Fell' is a word typically used to describe actions of things rather than people, and implies a disconnection between a thing and what it fell off of. Thus, when a writer wants to portray a character as falling, he should probably use another word. A better description might be: 'Smith slumped, resting his head wearily on the table.'

Of course, usually you see arms in here somewhere. After all, leaning forward and resting your head on a table unsupported is somewhat of a strain for the back. A still better revision might be 'Smith slumped over the table. Crossing his arms, he leaned forward and rested his head on them, burying himself in darkness.'

This statement portrays the character as a physically whole person, gives the reader a visual image of both setting and movement, and even provides some clues to his emotional state. Such a description does not throw the reader out of the story, but instead draws them deeper, making the story and the character more physically and psychologically present in the reader's mind.

Another good rule to follow when depicting character action is to describe such acts in the order in which they occur rather than reversed, i.e., "'What's that?' Jack pointed at the tower.'

In this example the character asks a question about something he hasn't seen yet. This requires the reader to mentally reverse the two statements, making the correction that the writer should have made in the first place: 'Jack pointed at the tower. "What's that?"'

A simple fix, but when such reversals occur frequently in a narrative, the end result is to subtly throw the reader out of the story and into the text, forcing them to listen to the words rather than to the sense and so lessen their commitment to the plot.

And a final rule to use when describing character action is to place such activities in chronological order, thus avoiding the common mistake of simultaneous occurrences such as 'He shook his hand and picked up the phone.'

Well, he can't do both at the same time -- one must precede the other, but the wording and punctuation of this sentence forces the reader to create the chronology himself, and the mental image is jarring to say the least. A better description would be 'He shook Jim's hand, then picked up the phone and dialed.' Again, a simple fix, but vital to holding the reader within the storyline.

Careful attention to detail is crucial to creating tightly woven character action and the choices exemplified above, however nitpicky they might seem at times, are typical of those required to construct a world in which a reader becomes deeply entwined. Part of such story construction relies upon an intimate understanding of the writer's contract with the reader, in which the reader must step blindly into the dark and trust the writer to understand and sidestep the hazards implicit within the verbal terrain. If the writer doesn't do that, the reader (and the editor) are quite likely to simply close the book or flip to the next story, putting the writer's product aside, never to return.

The description of physical action in a story is a subtle but significant facet of said contract, and one which a good writer takes seriously. At the same time, the writer must also take care to neither bore the reader nor insult her intelligence with too much detail, while simultaneously balancing the need to create clear description of a common topic known to all. Not an easy task, but one of the most rewarding for both writers and readers when successfully achieved.

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