

PACING TIPS

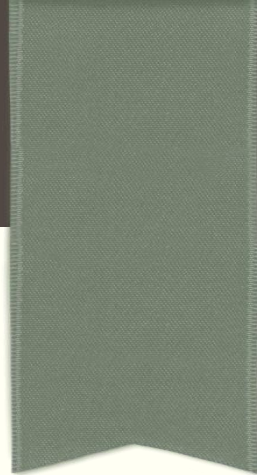
Shannon Donnelly



Pacing...we all worry about it.

- Is the story too slow?
- Do I have enough detail or too much?
- Am I really showing the character well on the page.





THERE ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP

Tip # 1

START as you mean to go on

Set your mood and tone
in the first line



Set the pace YOU WANT for your story

- Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. – Jane Austen, *Emma*
- Last night, I dreamt I went to Manderley again. – Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*
- Matilda Goodnight stepped back from her latest mural and realized that of all the crimes she'd committed in her thirty-four years, painting the floor-to-ceiling reproduction of van Gogh's sunflowers on Clarissa Donnelly's dining room wall was the one that was going to send her to hell.
– Jennifer Cruise, *Faking It*
- Lady Imogene Loveless enjoyed explosions. – Sarah MacLean, *Knockout*

What do all these opening lines do?

Tip # 2

Be Confident!

Pull your reader into YOUR
fictional world



Let's look at more of the opening of *Rebecca*...

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter, for the way was barred to me. There was a padlock and chain upon the gate. I called in my dream to the lodge-keeper, and had no answer, and peering closer through the rusted spokes of the gate I saw that the lodge was uninhabited.

No smoke came from the chimney, and the little lattice windows gaped forlorn. Then, like all dreamers, I was possessed of a sudden with supernatural powers and passed like a spirit through the barrier before me. The drive wound away in front of me, twisting and turning as it had always done, but as I advanced I was aware that a change had come upon it; it was narrow and unkempt, not the drive that we had known. At first I was puzzled and did not understand, and it was only when I bent my head to avoid the low swinging branch of a tree that I realized what had happened. Nature had come into her own again and, little by little, in her stealthy, insidious way had encroached upon the drive with long, tenacious fingers. The woods, always a menace even in the past, had triumphed in the end. They crowded, dark and uncontrolled, to the borders of the drive.

What feeling do you get from this?

Tip # 3

Weave in SPECIFIC details

Emphasis on specific
(meaning use the right detail)

Treat your fictional world as a
character that needs as much
description as any other
character.



Excerpt from Rogue Spy by Joanna Bourne...

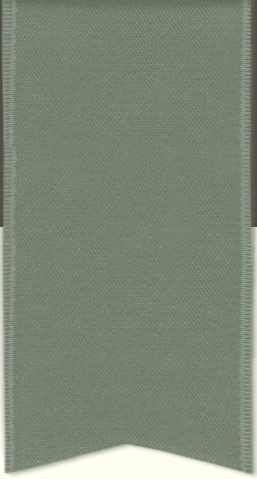
The window at her back was open to the morning. Sun fell across these nearest shelves in the pattern of the windowpanes, eighteen trapezoids across the books. The leather binding was mellow brown, red, and blue. The gold lettering on the spines turned to curls of fire.

To work, to work. She'd get the pesky small business of the day out of the way first. It was an old relaxing routine to cut a fresh nib on the pen and unstopper the ink. She slipped her shoes off and cuddled her stockinged feet under her, comfy as a cat. Her desk was bare as the deck of a ship at sea. When one codes and decodes for diplomats and the secret agencies of the British government, one keeps a tidy desk.

Why do the details stand out?

What is this SHOWING the reader?

Is that last sentence TELLING or SHOWING?



ENTRANCE THE READER WITH VIVID
IMAGERY—

AND THEN TIME CEASES TO EXIST

Tip # 4

Focus the Reader

Treat each scene as if you have
a camera in your hands



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Excerpt from *Lady Lost*

She stepped onto the stage in a ripple of smoke, shadows dancing on the white plaster of the wall behind her. Jules sat straighter in his chair.

The illusion of fog was a good one. It would hide any trap doors. The actress took one step forward, into the light of the stage lamps. Makeup left her oval face pale and perfect—a slash of dark, arched eyebrows, a curve of a red mouth. Under her black cape and hood, the brown of her elaborately arranged hair showed through glistening, white powder. Her skirts rustled and the spangles on her gown glinted. The dress belonged to a previous generation, but the woman moved with the grace of youth. She swept the room with a look...a challenge...arrogance in the dark eyes.

For an instant, their stares clashed.

Awareness shot through Jules and tingled on his skin. The woman commanded the stage—and his attention.

Her gaze seemed to linger a heart-beat longer before it shifted. He let out a breath.

With a wave of her hand and a burst of smoke, she conjured a box with thin legs onto the stage. A good trick from Madam de Mystère, otherwise known as Simone Raucourt, the featured act. She was his connection to Henri Allard...and the missing courier.

Now...unfocused same scene...

Jules David Alexander Chetwynd, Lord Sandal, watched the illusionist step onto the stage. The crowd in this one-time theater that was more a café seemed to quite.

Fog rolled out from some device, and the actress took a step forward. Shadows danced on the white plaster of the wall behind her. Jules sat straighter in his chair.

Makeup left the woman's face pale and perfect—a slash of dark, arched eyebrows, a curve of a red mouth. For an instant, his stare met hers and clashed. Awareness shot through Jules and tingled on his skin. Under her black cape and hood, the brown of her elaborately arranged hair showed through glistening, white powder. Her skirts rustled and the spangles on her gown glinted.

Jules glanced around the room. This woman, this Madam de Mystère, otherwise known as Simone Raucourt, the featured act, she was his connection to Henri Allard...and the missing courier.

He looked back to see her wave her hand. With a burst of smoke, she conjured a box with thin legs onto the stage. A good trick. The woman commanded the stage—and his attention.

WHY is this focused....

She stepped onto the stage in a ripple of smoke, shadows dancing on the white plaster of the wall behind her. Jules sat straighter in his chair. (WE START with a hook...who is 'she'? What's making the smoke?)

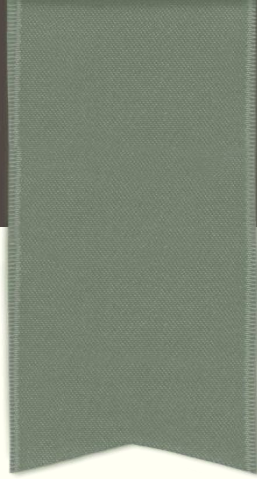
The illusion of fog was a good one. It would hide any trap doors. The actress took one step forward, into the light of the stage lamps. Makeup left her oval face pale and perfect—a slash of dark, arched eyebrows, a curve of a red mouth. Under her black cape and hood, the brown of her elaborately arranged hair showed through glistening, white powder. Her skirts rustled and the spangles on her gown glinted. The dress belonged to a previous generation, but the woman moved with the grace of youth. She swept the room with a look...a challenge...arrogance in the dark eyes. (DETAILS layered, sketched in...we move the reader's eye from face to other details...people generally notice faces first. Then we had a touch of emotion.)

For an instant, their stares clashed. (SHIFT the reader's attention from her to him...sentence structure varied.)

Awareness shot through Jules and tingled on his skin. The woman commanded the stage—and his attention.

Her gaze seemed to linger a heart-beat longer before it shifted. He let out a breath. (BOTH these paragraphs are about Jules....about his emotions. We also have action/reaction.)

With a wave of her hand and a burst of smoke, she conjured a box with thin legs onto the stage. A good trick from Madam de Mystère, otherwise known as Simone Raucourt, the featured act. She was his connection to Henri Allard...and the missing courier. (SETUP complete....we answer a couple of questions...and raise even more)

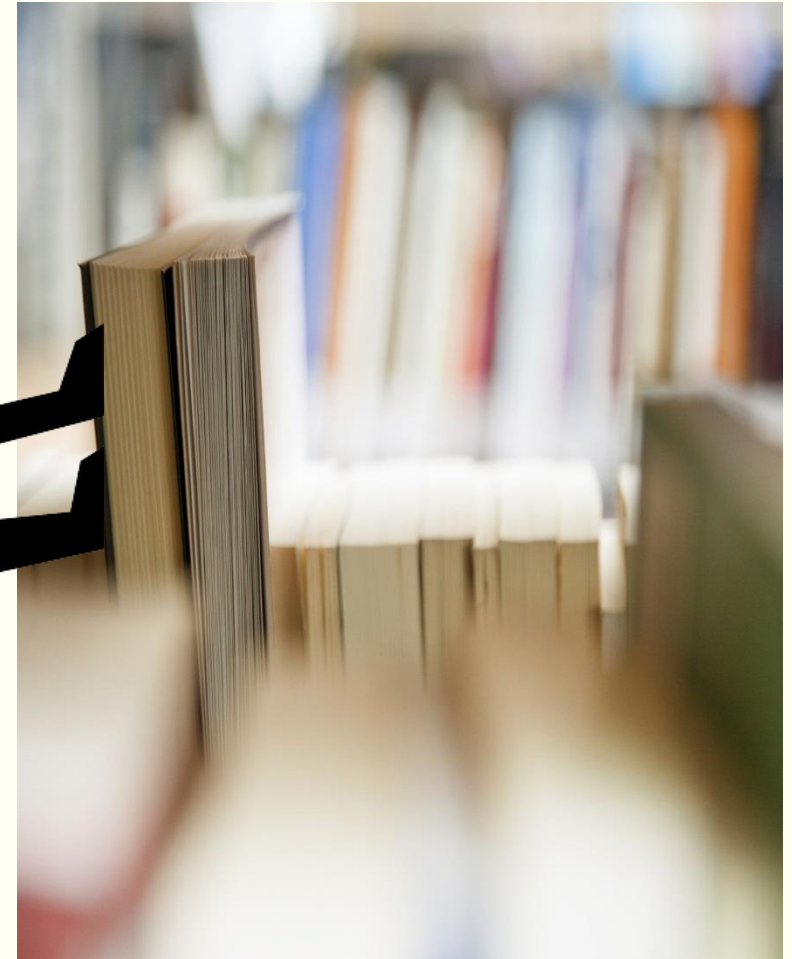


KNOW WHAT YOU WANT THE
READER TO FEEL...AND NOTICE
WHAT DO YOU FEEL?

Tip # 5

Push the backstory BACK

Make it a game—
how long can you
make the reader wait
for the backstory?



Action moves the story forward—readers want story first

- Dialogue is action – will speed up pace.
- Internal thought is not action – will slow pace.
- Tension speeds up pace (give the reader little bits of information, and withholding other bits).
- Plot exposition slows the pace (stops it dead in dialogue)—this is the deadly TELLING.
- Flow speeds up the pace.
- Let readers feel clever and participate—drop breadcrumbs not info bombs—this is SHOWING.
- Make it a challenge...how long can you make the reader wait for backstory?

**There's stuff that you—the writer—need to write so that you KNOW this inside out.
This is not stuff the reader needs...not right away, at least.**

OLD First Pages of *Lady Lost* – All cut and saved for later (backstory)

Bonaparte's return threatened all—and the crowd here wasn't letting him forget that. If the gossip printed in *Le Moniteur Universel* held true, the Emperor had arrived at Fontainebleau and would soon march his ever expanding army into Paris. An Englishman with a dubious passport might not fare well. Of course, his papers, tucked inside his waistcoat, showed his name as Marsett—his step-father's surname—and not Jules David Alexander Chetwynd, Lord Sandal. His occupation, a wine merchant. Passing as a Frenchman made for less scrutiny. An English lord on a task to assist the French king as a favor for England's Secretary of State for War would no doubt fare worse than an ordinary fellow once Bonaparte reclaimed his empire. Damn all, but he wanted this task done so he could go home to his bed, his work, and get on with his life. At the very least, it would have been nice to have had Anthony's help, or that of any of the other members of the Black Cabinet. However, Anthony might still be in Vienna, at the congress now breaking up, or he might be following after Wellington, who was due to meet up with the Prussians. Lazlo Brecht would no doubt remain in Austria—he really had only ever wanted to look after his empire's interests. Only Thiebaut Ferris had remained in France. Jules wondered if Bonaparte's return would stir Ferris from his château in the Loire—that old part of Brittany—and his new bride. He doubted that. Love made men into fools. He'd started to feel ridiculous himself for this hasty trip which was now not a simple thing.

Tip # 6

Strip your protagonist to the
CORE

Theme will help with figuring out
what this should be

Determining Theme

Who is the main
character?

What problem
did they face?

How did the problem
impact the character?

How did the character
solve the problem?

How did the
character change?

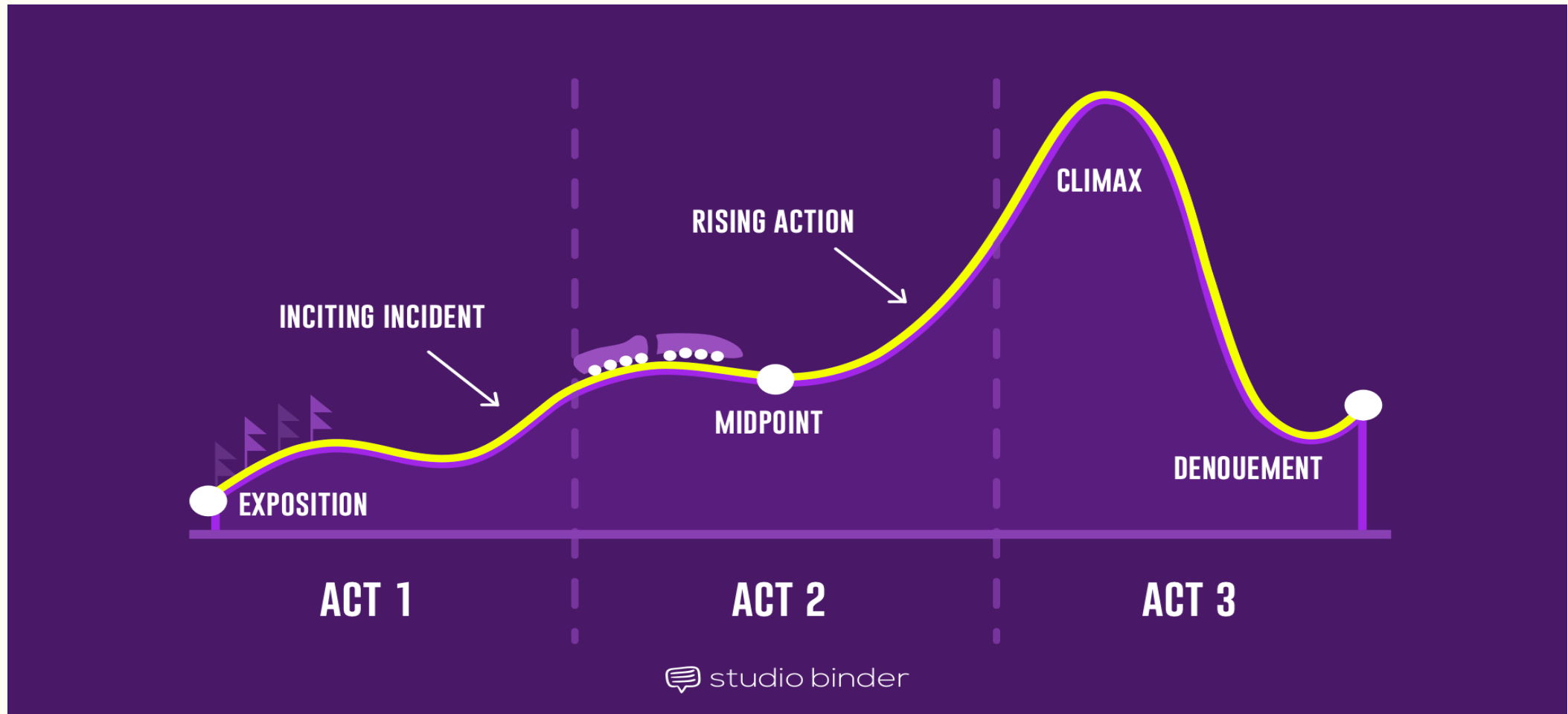
What did the
character learn?

Theme in one word /
one sentence

Rising Action

- Comes from a character having to make tougher and tougher choices to get what that character wants, and face greater and greater risks.
- Know what every character really, really, really wants—what does that character NOT want to give up to get that (have them facing that).
- Theme helps you figure out what these tough choices should be about.
- Turning points—the character turns in a new direction...let characters surprise you and the reader (in a good way).
- To sort this out, start small and work bigger, or...
- Know the big end and work backwards to build up to this.

Rising Action



<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-rising-action-definition/>

Consider Your Opening

- Openings set the tone for the rest of the story.
- The reader needs some establishment of place, time, protagonist.
- Throwing the reader into the deep end with action is not always the best idea (it can be if you are writing an action-packed thriller or suspense story, but otherwise, the reader might need less speed to start).
- It is a good idea to start with the protagonist—the person with the most at stake and who will change/grow the most.
- Look at books you LOVE—what sort of openings do they have?
- Play to your strengths—if you don't do descriptions well, lean more on dialogue.
- If you start off with slight action/tension you can build. If you start with lots of action/tension where do you go from there?

Tip # 7

Use “*Ma*”

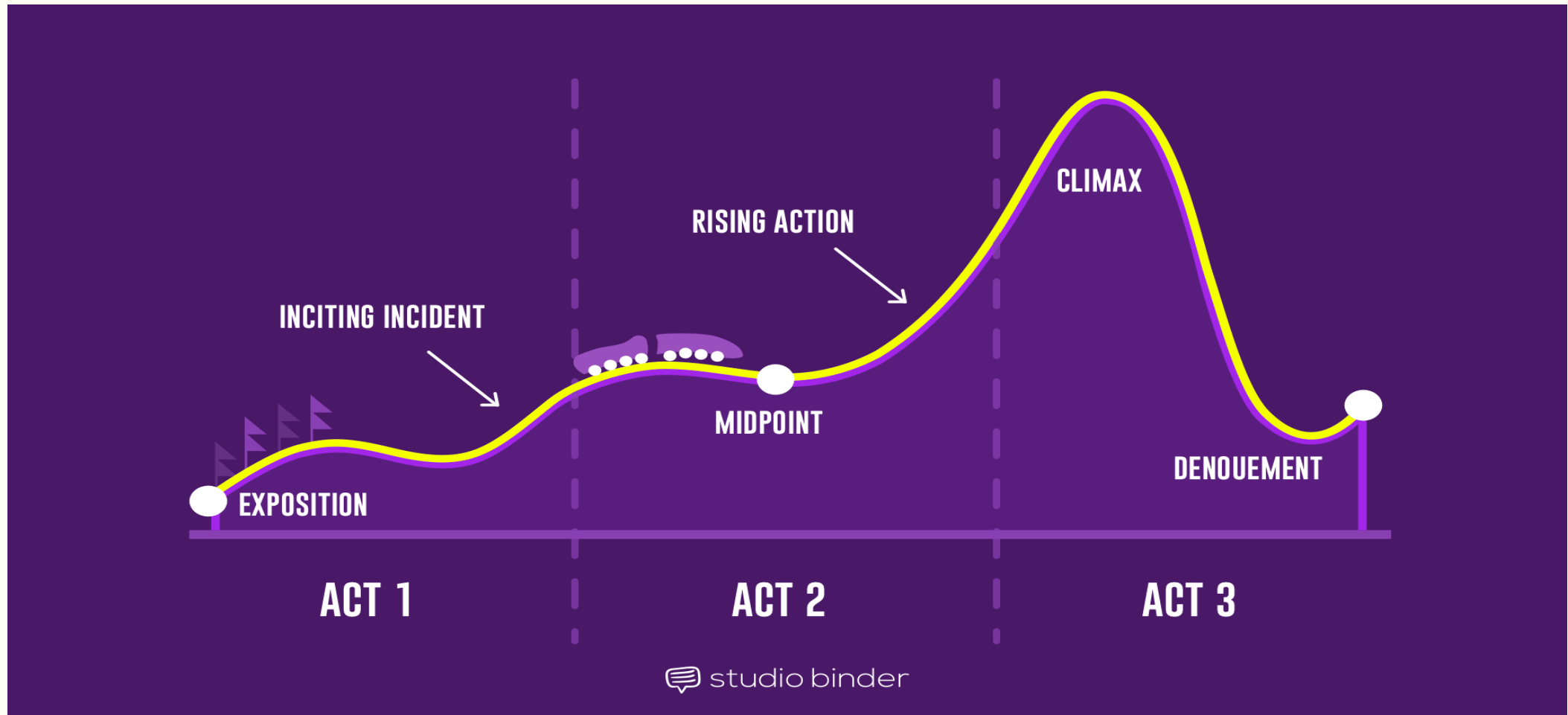
Also known as
a sequel to a scene



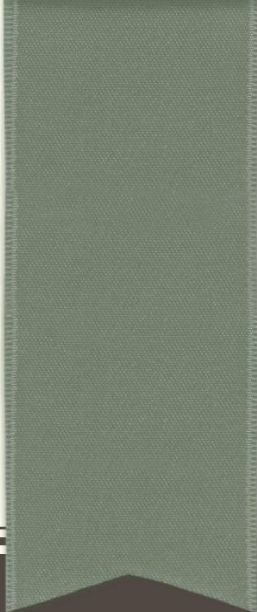
The Space Between—Sequels between Scenes

- The Japanese word of “ma” is the pause—it is the **space** between hand claps.
- Video from Danny Boyd’s CinemaStix speaks to Hayao Miyazaki’s use of pacing to create moments in his animated movies to allow that ‘ma’ or a “moment to just breathe”.
- Allows the tension to build again after the pause (slow before fast again).
- Provides moments of character development.
- Use to develop setting as a character—always put your characters somewhere.
- This is a place to put thoughts, introspection, new plans, shift in direction.

The Release of Tension



<https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-rising-action-definition/>



IF YOU HAVE TENSION, TENSION,
TENSION, TENSION
THE READER BECOMES NUMB

Tip # 8

Read your work **ALOUD**

Can't stress this enough



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Try to do this in one session, and it is best on hard copy

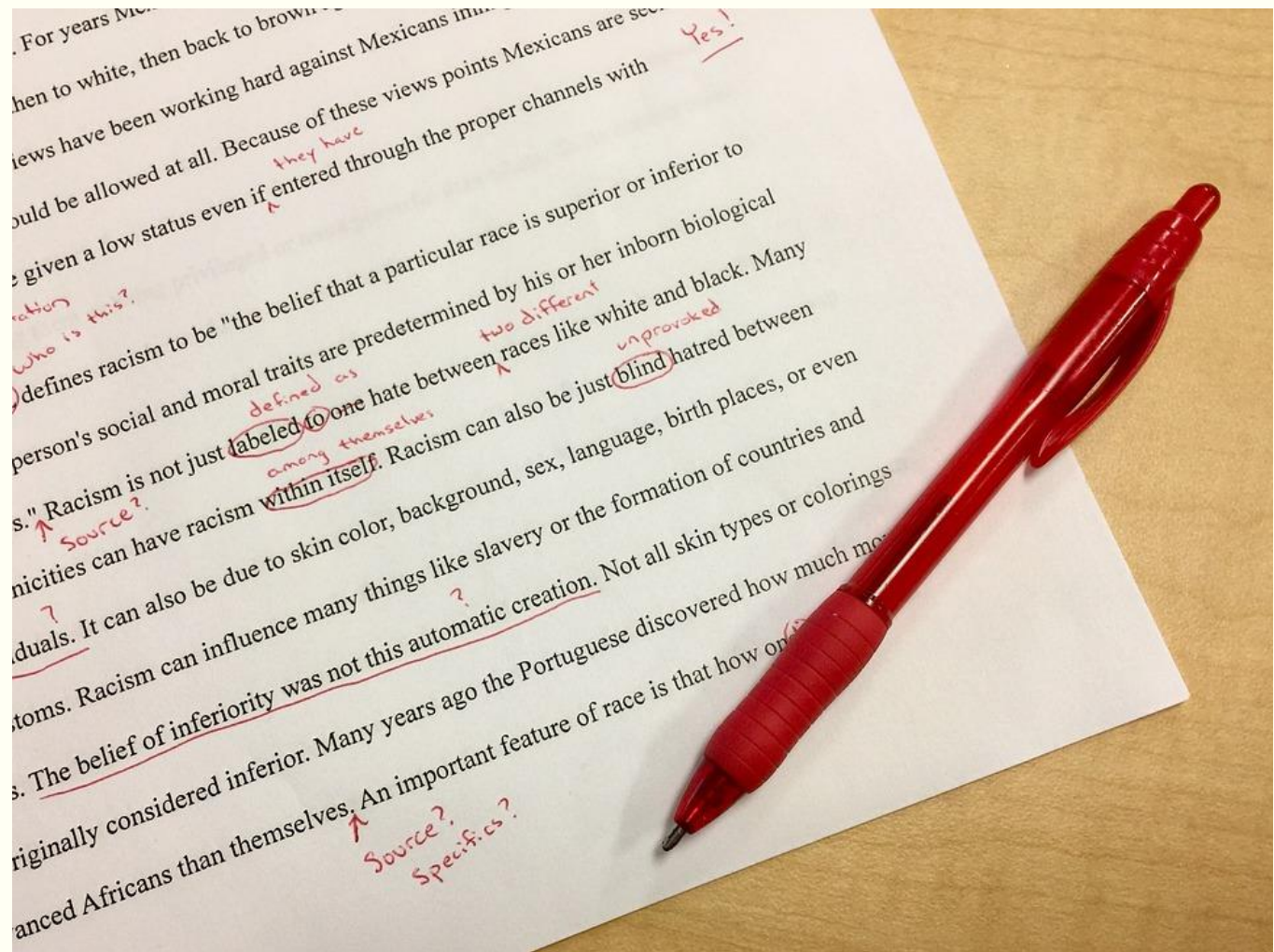
- Mark where you stop reading.
- Mark where your attention wanders.
- Mark the spots where you trip.
- Mark scenes that tell too much instead of showing the character and world to the reader.
- Mark where description might be too much or too little...put a question mark.
- Mark where you have emotion...put a smiley face so you don't edit that out.
- Don't stop to revise—you'll go back and fix all this stuff later.

This is how you find that slow scene, that sagging bit, that awkward construction, that missed typo, that formatting problem, that dull dialogue.

Tip # 9

Edits are your friend

Revision and multiple drafts
help you manage pacing



Beta readers are also a big help

- Hand off the book when it is DONE (not before).
- Cut extra words, smooth awkward sentences.
- Pacing issues are best handled with a full draft of the story done.
- Check chapter lengths, openings, and endings (look for too short and chopping in the opening, or long and dragging as the story progresses).
- Editing is also where you can see if the book is sagging in the middle due to not really having a clear, strong conflict—or if the viewpoint is all wrong in any scene.
- Consider cutting first 5... 10... or 30 pages.

Draft 1 to Draft 8

1. The place was less a theater than a rather run-down café next to the older, closed theater. It offered a black and white tile floor, a stage that was no more than a clear space, crowded tables and chair, pro-Napoleonic songs, bouquets of violets to be worn as symbols for the return of spring and the emperor, and a just now a wretched play, complete with more songs, about a lady who turns from aristocrat into the symbol of liberty. The place smelled of onions, cheap wine, and too many unwashed bodies.

8. Shifting restless in his chair, Jules glanced around the theater. It was more of a café with its tables and chairs, and its black and white checkered floor. Past splendor haunted the décor with bits of carved columns in dark corners. Two chandeliers clung to the ceiling as if desperate to hold onto past glory, their crystals dusty and dim. The crowd had quieted. Those sober enough to give their attention leaned forward. For an instant, irritation surged that he must wait for his answers.

Tip # 10

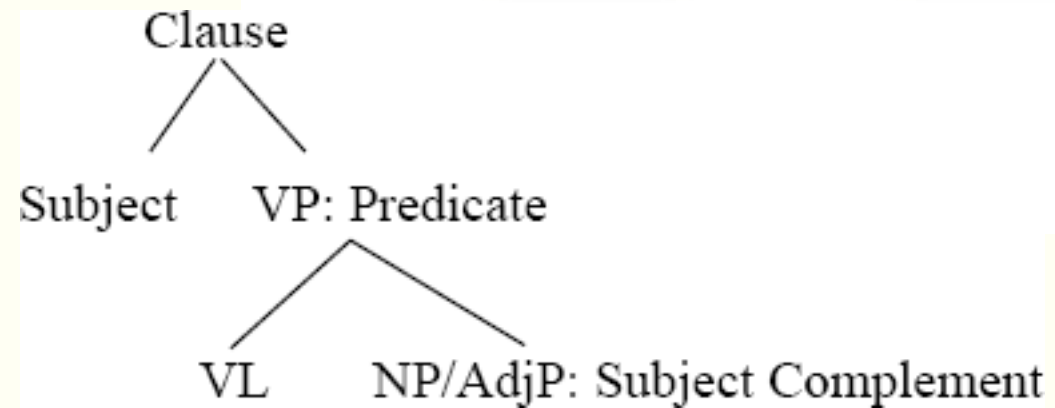
Think about FLOW

Vary and link....

Words

Sentences

Paragraphs



What is FLOW?

- Sentence structure—too much of the same structure dulls the reader’s “ear (you can overdo noun/verb).
- Smooth construction (watch out for “as” construction that steps on staging—“as” works best for comparison).
- No choppy paragraphs—sentence fragments lack punch if that is all you have.
- A good guideline is one thought per sentence, one topic per paragraph.
- Viewpoint shifts are a place to trip up the reader (and flatten the emotion)—handle these with care, some bit of action, and proper names.

Good pacing in a story is largely about a good flow of details that reveal the character, add tension, increase conflict and advance the plot (action).

Except from *The Punishment She Deserves* by Elizabeth George

The last thing Barbara Havers had ever expected when she'd agreed to tap-dancing lessons in the company of Dorothea Harriman, the department secretary of her division in the Metropolitan Police, was that she would actually enjoy the activity. She'd gone along with the plan merely because she was worn down after listening to relentlessly given arguments on the subject of the benefits of tap dancing as exercise. Although most forms of exercise that didn't involve pushing a shopping trolley up and down the aisles of the nearest Tesco had long been anathema to Barbara, she'd fairly quickly run out of excuses on the subject of being too busy.

At least she'd managed to remove Dorothea's hands from her love life or, more specifically, from her lack thereof. To do this, she'd invoked the name of an Italian policeman—Salvatore Lo Bianco—with whom she'd become acquainted during the previous year. That had stirred Dorothea's interest, which was further stirred when Barbara informed her that she was expecting a visit from Inspector Lo Bianco and his two children round Christmastime. Alas and alack, that hadn't happened, a sudden appendectomy performed on twelve-year-old Marco having prevented this. But wisely, Barbara hadn't shared her disappointment with Dorothea. As far as the departmental secretary knew, the visit had occurred and bliss of some acceptable sort was just round the corner.

Why does this work?

Except from *The Punishment She Deserves* by Elizabeth George

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Connecting is rarely done in first draft.

Transition from Chapter One to Chapter Two in *Lady Lost*

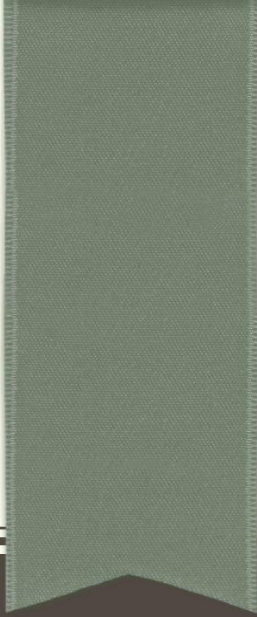
She choked out a small laugh. “Yet you take a very quick interest in my brother? Well, I have some cares, and if you are right and Henri needs help, then you may help. But only on my terms.”

“Madam, I am here only to finish an errand, now if you would—”

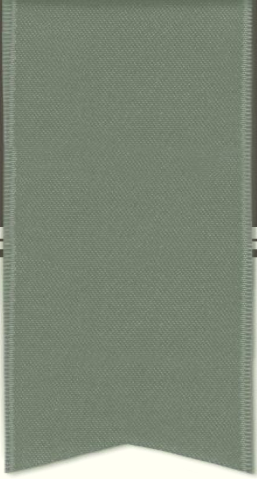
Before he could finish speaking, the door to the dressing room swung open and Ange burst in with the energy of a small storm. She lifted a bottle of wine in one hand and two mismatched glasses in the other. At once Ange went still. She glanced from Simone to M’sieur Marsett.

A creole accent shaped her French, as she said, “I ought to have brought a third glass.”

Think about a hook to next chapters.
Think about the set up for the next scene.



CONTROL OF VIEWPOINT IMPROVES EMOTION ON THE PAGE



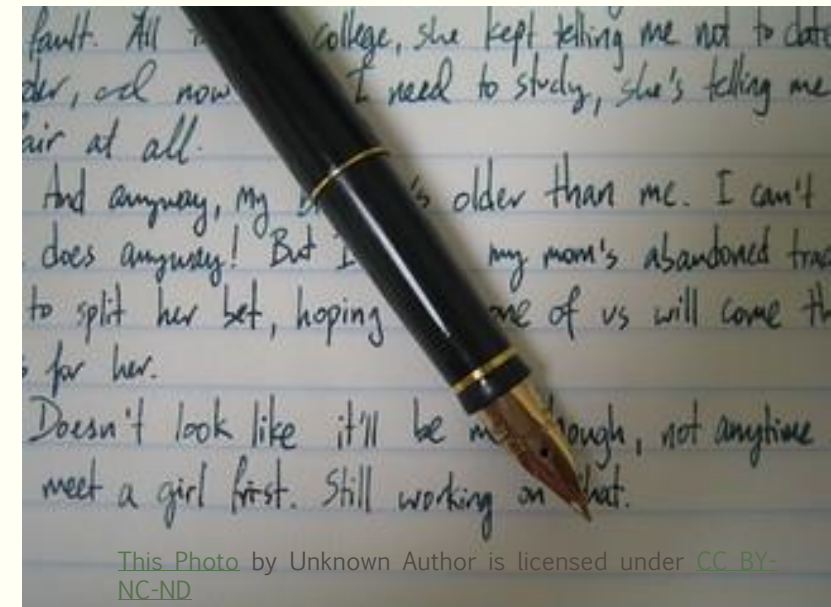
QUESTIONS ?

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If we have time...quick exercise

- Think of the first sentence in the story you are currently working on...
- Revise it to better incorporate mood, pace, and pose a question (without actually asking a question)
- Five minutes....GO....



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