

Elements of Action

Notes on Movement in Fiction

Workshop Notes
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Workshop Notes

A series of short guides on fiction writing

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What Do We Mean by Action?

When people hear the word action, they often imagine movement.

A chase. A fight. An escape. A murder.

A dramatic confession.

All of these are certainly actions.

But prose is more generous than that.

A person may spend an entire story preparing dinner. Waiting for a phone call. Walking a dog.

Looking through old photographs.

Externally, very little happens.

Internally, everything does.

One of the great freedoms of fiction is that action is not limited to visible events. Action can happen in the mind, in memory, in perception, in hesitation, in silence.

The question is not how much happens. The question is whether something moves.

What follows is not a set of rules. It is rather a collection of elements that may help stories to be told.

Selective Attention

Nobody notices everything.

A nervous man notices the stain on the tablecloth but ignores the fact that his wife has stopped speaking. A child notices a shiny bracelet but misses the tension between adults. A grieving woman notices the weather and not the condolences.

What a character pays attention to tells us who they are.

What they fail to notice tells us even more.

Sometimes the most important thing in a scene remains invisible to the character and perfectly visible to the reader.

Attention creates perspective.

Perspective creates a story.

The Double Layer

A character may be washing dishes while reliving an argument.

Walking the dog while planning a resignation.

Waiting for a train while deciding whether to leave a marriage.

Externally, one story unfolds.

Internally, another.

Very often, the tension between those two layers is where fiction becomes interesting.

The reader watches one action and senses another beneath it.

This gap creates depth.

Stakes

Not every story needs life-or-death consequences. But every story benefits from stakes. Something matters to the character. Something can be lost. Something can be gained.

The scale matters less than the emotional investment. The reader does not need to agree with the character. The reader only needs to understand why the character cares.

Inevitability

Some actions feel random. Others feel inevitable. The most satisfying stories often contain moments that seem surprising and unavoidable at the same time.

Looking back, we understand why the character acted this way. Not because fate demanded it. Because the character demanded it.

The action grows from personality. The decision grows from history. The consequence grows from the decision.

In this way, character becomes the engine of the story.

Tempo and Rhythm

Events and consequences rarely happen at the same speed.

A life-changing event may take ten seconds.

Consequences may require ten years.

Or the opposite.

A character spends years anticipating something that happens in a single moment.

The rhythm of fiction emerges from this tension.

Fast events.

Slow realizations.

Slow events.

Sudden realizations.

Stories become richer when action and perception move at different speeds.

The Trace

Not every important event needs to appear on the page.

Sometimes it is enough to show what remains.

An empty chair. A broken glass. A forgotten coat. A room that feels different after somebody leaves.

Readers are good at reconstructing the previous events. They see the traces and imagine the missing parts.

Often, the imagination creates something more powerful than direct description.

Writing Prompts

Selective Attention

Write a potentially important conversation.

The character does not focus on the conversation itself. Instead, they become distracted by details, objects, sounds, gestures, or the surrounding environment.

The Trace

Describe a place after an event.

Do not show the event itself.

Do not explain it.

Allow the reader to reconstruct what happened through details, smells, objects, absences, and the observations of a witness.

A room after somebody leaves.

A kitchen after a sleepless night.

A schoolyard years after childhood.

A house after an argument.

Let the traces tell the story.

A Final Thought

Stories do not move only through events.

They move through attention.

Through desire.

Through avoidance.

Through misunderstanding.

Through memory.

Through the distance between what happens and what is understood.

Sometimes the most important action in a story is a person noticing the wrong thing at exactly the right moment.

About the Author

Masha Kamenetskaya is a writer, playwright, workshop facilitator, and publisher of Panel Literature Association, based in Hungary.

She writes fiction, essays, and plays, and works with emerging writers through creative writing workshops and individual mentoring.

These guides grew out of workshop discussions, writing exercises, literary observations, and conversations about stories and storytelling.

To learn more about Masha's work, upcoming workshops, and publications, visit:
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