

How To Write a Fight Scene

by Randy Ingermanson

compiled by Bryce Beattie

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About the Author:

Award-winning novelist Randy Ingermanson, "the Snowflake Guy," publishes the Advanced Fiction Writing E-zine, with more than 6000 readers, every month. If you want to learn the craft and marketing of fiction, AND make your writing more valuable to editors, AND have FUN doing it, visit <http://www.AdvancedFictionWriting.com>. Download your free Special Report on Tiger Marketing and get a free 5-Day Course in How To Publish a Novel.

Compiler's note: This special report was assembled from issues of Randy Ingermanson's terrific "Advanced Fiction Writing" e-zine. It is a terrific source of information and ideas for new and experienced writers alike. I highly suggest you check it out.

How To Write a Fight Scene -- Part 1

I rarely interfere with the writing styles of my friends if they're published authors. I don't want to mess them up. The one exception is when their fight scenes stink. That's when I step in and do a little coaching.

There is nothing in the world easier than to write a well-paced and exciting fight scene. There is nothing in the world easier than to screw up a fight scene.

You may argue that those two things can't both be the easiest thing in the world. Sigh. Don't bother me with logic here. Just step outside and we'll settle this argument like Real Men.

It may be that you'll never need to write a fight scene. If so, keep driving by -- there's nothing to look at here.

But if you think you might ever need to have your characters duke it out, then pay attention. Fight scenes are really easy, if you know the rules.

Here are the Official Fight Scene Rules:

- a) Show, don't tell
- b) Make it happen in real-time
- c) Enforce causality
- d) Show sequence, not simultaneity
- e) Favor completed verbs over continuing action verbs
- f) Show the fastest stuff first
- g) For every action, show a reaction
- h) Use interior monologue and dialogue to set the pace

I could explain all these in boring detail, but that would be Telling you. Right now, I want to Show you. So here's a Wretched Fight Scene that violates all the rules. Read it first, weep some, and then pull yourself together so we can analyze it.

After taking six or eight or maybe even ten punches and kicks to all parts of his body -- such as the solar plexus and shins and head -- Arnie was hurting quite badly, although perhaps not as badly as when Mrs. Weevil gave him a D in spelling in third grade when he KNEW "potato" had no "e" in it.

In any event, Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting that Bruce was an ambidextrous excuse for a moron, just after he saw Bruce throwing another

punch at him. But none of this worked, because before he could do any of that, Bruce jumped high in the air and kicked Arnie in the eye, so none of the stuff Arnie tried actually worked because he was lying there on the ground wondering if he was ever going to see Cindy Lou Who again, who had grown up to be quite cute, even if she was a dumb mutt in seventh grade, and also he was screaming in agony.

"Want some more, you little lout?" Bruce said as he kicked Arnie in the kidneys about fifteen times and then grabbed his head and pounded it on the ground. All this time, Arnie was jabbing Bruce in places like the groin and stomach, but it didn't do any good until the end when Bruce fell over in a faint, just after Arnie cried "Uncle!"

Oh, Lordy, Lordy! Where to start on this horrible thing?

a) Let's begin with the first rule, "Show, don't tell." This is violated almost continuously. Look at the first sentence:

"After taking six or eight or maybe even ten punches and kicks to all parts of his body -- such as the solar plexus and shins and head..."

The reason this is "telling" is because those punches are all lumped together into one big glop, making it impossible to say with any certainty how many punches there actually were. Nor are we sure exactly which body parts are

getting all the punishment, although we get a list of a few parts that might be getting whacked. Or might not -- who knows?

And furthermore, what's Arnie doing while he's taking all those punches? Don't tell me he's just patiently accepting them? Does he throw a counterpunch? Beg for mercy? Phone E.T.? We can't see this scene. We can't see Arnie. We're just being told about it.

The rest of the scene has numerous similar examples of telling, but let's look at some of the other rules violations.

b) The next rule is "Make it happen in real-time." When a fight is happening in real-time, you see one punch and then RIGHT AWAY, you see the response and then RIGHT AWAY you see the next punch. In real-time, when the action is falling fast and furious, you don't have time for musing like this:

"Arnie was hurting quite badly, although perhaps not as badly as when Mrs. Weevil gave him a D in spelling in third grade when he KNEW 'potato' had no 'e' in it."

If you don't believe me, I'll send Bruce over to discuss the matter with you, and we'll just see how much time you have for thinking about dear Mrs. Weevil.

c) Let's move on to the next rule, "Enforce causality." When I talk about causality, I mean that a cause should be shown first, and then the effect AFTERWARDS. If you show the effect and then the cause, it looks absurd. As in this paragraph:

"In any event, Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting that Bruce was an ambidextrous excuse for a moron, just after he saw Bruce throwing another punch at him."

So let's untangle this. What happened first? Arnie saw Bruce throwing another punch at him. But that's shown LAST in this sentence. The effect is shown FIRST, and it's a long sequence of events that I've drawn out ludicrously: Arnie ducks his head. Arnie spins to the right. Arnie kicks. Arnie shouts. Only after we see all that do we see the cause for it all.

d) The next rule tells us to "Show sequence, not simultaneity". What I mean is that it rarely makes sense to try to make two different actions simultaneous in a fight scene.

Why? Because a fight scene is chock full of all different sorts of actions, each of which takes a different amount of time. If one action takes a tenth of a second and another takes two seconds, the action will feel distorted if the author asserts that they happen simultaneously.

In our example, we've got this gem:

"Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting that Bruce was an ambidextrous excuse for a moron"

You can spin to the right pretty quick. You can kick pretty quick. But how long does it take to shout that bit about the ambidextrous excuse for a moron? (And what would that mean, anyway?) All this action CAN'T happen simultaneously. So it's a heinous crime to say that it does.

e) On to the next rule: "Favor completed verbs over continuing action verbs." In other words, use simple past tense verbs such as "kicked" or "punched" or "shouted" rather than those pesky participles such as "kicking" or "punching" or "shouting".

The reason for this is simple. When you say "Arnie kicked Bruce," you imply that it happened quickly and it's now over. Which is what the camera would show. When you say "Arnie was kicking Bruce," you imply that it's going on and on and on. But a kick happens in a few tenths of a second, so your mind has no option except to see the kick happening over and over and over again. Or happening in super Slo-Mo. Either way, it's not much like a fight any more.

In this paragraph, we've got the worst of all possible worlds, because we're mixing completed verbs with continuing action verbs:

"Arnie ducked his head and spun to the right, simultaneously kicking out furiously with his foot and shouting"

Such horrible writing is enough to make grown men cry.

f) On to the next rule violation: "Show the fastest stuff first." What that means is that when you sequence a group of events that are happening at roughly the same time, show those that happen fastest before you show those that happen slowest. Look at this segment:

"none of the stuff Arnie tried actually worked because he was lying there on the ground wondering if he was ever going to see Cindy Lou Who again, who had grown up to be quite cute, even if she was a dumb mutt in seventh grade, and also he was screaming in agony."

Obviously there are multiple problems here, but note this: we show Arnie ruminating about Cindy Lou Who (which could take a couple seconds, given what a slow wit Arnie is) and THEN we see him screaming in agony (which he should be doing pretty fast, with all the kicks he's getting.) If you're going to show these, it's better to show him screaming first and THEN show him ruminating.

g) The next rule is extremely important: "For every action, show a reaction." This means that if Bruce punches 6 times and Arnie jabs back 6 times,

then you need to shuffle them together, rather than lumping all the punches together and then all the jabs. Look at the text:

"Want some more, you little lout?" Bruce said as he kicked Arnie in the kidneys about fifteen times and then grabbed his head and pounded it on the ground. All this time, Arnie was jabbing Bruce in places like the groin and stomach

So Bruce is performing a whole bunch of actions all lumped together, and only then do we see any of the reactions from Arnie, which are also all lumped together. The net effect is to smooth out the fight sequence into a bland oatmeal of muffled actions. You can't see a scene like this in your head. Oh, sure, you see SOMETHING. But it's nothing like what the author intended.

h) The final rule is: "Use interior monologue and dialogue to set the pace." Pace is important in a fight scene. It's utterly unrealistic to show a nonstop flurry of actions and reactions.

Real fighters will exchange a series of punches or kicks or whatever. Then they'll back off and look each other over, catching their breath and watching for weaknesses. A real fight has ebbs and flows in the pacing. You show the faster parts of the scene by short sentences that show ONLY the actions and reactions. You show the slower parts of the scene by longer sentences that show actions and reactions INTERSPERSED with interior monologue and dialogue.

Your goal in a fight scene is to make it take just about as long to read as it would take to happen in real time. You do that by controlling the pacing.

In the fight scene shown, we have blocks of both interior monologue and dialogue tossed in at the very height of the action.

The example I've given does not even deserve an F. It's too horrible to merit a grade at all. It's also too horrible to even try rewriting. The most merciful thing we can do is forget it ever happened. (Go ahead, forget all about Arnie and Bruce right now.)

Next month, we'll study a good fight scene from a real novel and see how the author used the rules to control the scene.

How To Write a Fight Scene -- Part 2

Last month we talked about fight scenes and I showed the most wretched fight scene ever typed. (I wrote it myself, and it stinks like skunk stew).

This month, we'll look at a better fight scene from a novel and analyze its strengths and weaknesses.

To do that, we need some way to measure good and bad in a fight scene. I'll remind you of the Official Fight Scene Rules that I gave last month. Actually, these are my rules, but I have no doubt that all right-thinking people agree with me.

Here are the Official Fight Scene Rules:

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Let's take an example fight scene from a real novel. We'll look at *Timeline*, by Michael Crichton. This scene is on page 235 of the hardcover edition of the book. I'll do a running commentary on it as we go, explaining where Crichton follows the rules effectively and where he violates them effectively. Yes, he breaks the rules, but it's for a reason.

First, a little background. Our protagonist, Marek, has time-traveled back to 14th century France with some friends. He and a friend Chris have been finagled into a joust. Chris is a terrible fighter and has been unhorsed and is lying on the ground in a stupor. His opponent, the 14th century knight Sir Guy Malegant, is about to kill him, but fortunately Marek has dispatched his own opponent and has come to rescue Chris. Marek and Guy are now fighting with swords:

Marek swung his sword desperately. Behind Sir Guy, he saw Chris begin to move. Marek would have shouted to him to stay where he was, but he had no breath to speak.

Marek swung again, and again.

Randy sez: There's a problem here. Marek is swinging his sword again and again, but what's Sir Guy doing? We don't see any response. So this segment feels a little surreal. Is Marek making impact? Being parried? Missing like a fool? We don't know. Better to show Sir Guy's responses. Rule (g) is being violated here. Let's continue with the action.

Now Chris was pulling at his helmet, trying to get it off. Guy was still ten yards from Chris. Dancing backward, enjoying himself, parrying Marek's blows easily.

Marek knew he was almost at the limits of his strength now. His swings were increasingly weak. Guy was still strong, still smooth. Just backing and parrying. Waiting for his chance.

Randy sez: This is no longer in real time. Crichton has reverted to telling, rather than showing. He's violating rules (a), (b), (e), and (g). And that's a GOOD thing. Crichton's goal here is NOT to show us every thrust and parry. At this point, he wants Marek to back Sir Guy up so he'll trip over Chris. So Crichton NEEDS to "tell" here, rather than "show." This is one of those rare cases when a fight scene actually needs some "telling." Nothing is really going to happen until Sir Guy trips over Chris, so it's best just to summarize. Continuing on with the fight:

Five yards.

Chris had rolled over on his stomach, and he was now getting up. He was on all fours. Hanging his head. Then there was a loud retching sound.

Guy heard it, too, turned his head a little to look--

Randy sez: Crichton is wrapping up the "telling" part. He's maneuvered Sir Guy into position to trip over Chris, so with the final paragraph shown above, Crichton switches back into "showing" mode. The fight scene will now resume as real action again:

Marek charged, butted him in the breastplate with his head, and Guy staggered backward, fell over Chris and went down.

Malegant rolled quickly on the ground, but Marek was on him, stamping on Guy's right hand to pin the sword down, then swinging his other leg over to pin the opposite shoulder. Marek held his sword high, ready to plunge it down.

The crowd fell silent.

Guy did not move.

Slowly, Marek lowered his sword, cut the laces to Guy's helmet, and pushed it back with the tip of his blade. Guy's head was now exposed. Marek saw he was bleeding freely from his left ear.

Guy glared at him and spat.

Randy sez: Crichton has now given us a nice sequence of actions and reactions. It's well done, and has the rhythms of a real fight, with one exception which could have been done better. That paragraph with Malegant rolling on the ground has a slightly out of focus pace, because of those verbs "stamping" and "swinging" which slow things down. And Sir Guy just lies there like a lump of Gumby, doing nothing. Why isn't he fighting back?

You may think me an arrogant varmint for daring to rewrite Michael Crichton, but I'll take a stab at it. Yes, I'm arrogant. I've rewritten better writers than Mikey. Here's how I think it could have been done a bit better:

Malegant rolled quickly on the ground. Marek leapt forward, stamped on Guy's right hand to pin the sword down, and swung his other leg over to pin the opposite shoulder. Sir Guy arched his back and kicked uselessly. He spat at Marek. Marek raised his sword high, ready to plunge it down.

Randy sez: A little better, no? You be the judge. If I'm wrong, it won't be the first time. Ditto if I'm right. I think there are still problems here. Marek gets Guy immobile just a bit too easily. So I think this should be broken out into a longer sequence to make it more plausible. But enough is enough.

OK, let's wrap up here. This sequence comes at the end of a fairly long scene in which Crichton did a brilliant job of bringing jousting to life. It's a strong scene, and Crichton made a smart move in breaking the rules in order to get through a dull spot in the action and push Sir Guy into position to be tripped.

It's OK to break the rules, as long as there's a good reason. But you need to have a good reason.

If anyone doesn't agree with me, well . . . step outside and you can discuss the situation. With Marek. I'll sit there quietly throwing up on the ground.

Next month, we'll look at another fight scene, one of my favorites, from Irwin Shaw's book, RICH MAN, POOR MAN. See ya then!

How To Write a Fight Scene -- Part 3

In the last two months, we've talked about how to write fight scenes. I showed you the world's worst fight scene (written by me, doing my utmost to be wretched). And I showed you a scene from Michael Crichton's novel *TIMELINE* and pointed out where it worked and where it could have worked better.

I'll remind you that there are rules for fight scenes, laid down by me in my role as Supreme Dictator For Life.

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Let's now look at a fight scene by a master of the craft, Irwin Shaw, in his novel RICH MAN, POOR MAN.

It's 1945, and our protagonist, Tommy Jordache is a 15-year-old baby-faced street fighter punk. He and his friend Claude have spent their evening in a movie theater baiting a burly soldier and his girlfriend. Now, outside the theater, Tommy lures the larger man into a fight by ripping his coat. We pick up the action there:

"Nobody gets away with tearing my coat," the soldier said. "I don't care who he is." He swung with his open hand. Tom moved in and let the blow fall on his left shoulder. "Ow!" he screamed, putting his right hand to his shoulder and bending over as if he were in terrible pain.

Randy sez: Notice how Shaw modulates the pace with his choice of verbs. The fast parts of this paragraph are shown with simple past tense verbs -- "swung" and "moved" and "screamed". Then Shaw slows down the action by using those continuing action verbs "putting" and "bending". This gives the paragraph the feeling of happening in real time. Let's look at the next part of the sequence:

"Did you see that?" Claude demanded of the spectators. "Did you see that man hit my friend?"

"Listen, soldier," a gray-haired man in a raincoat said, "you can't beat up a little kid like that."

"I just gave him a little slap," the soldier turned to the man apologetically. "He's been dogging me all..."

Suddenly Tom straightened up and hitting upward, with his closed fist, struck the soldier, not too hard, so as not to discourage him, along the side of the jaw.

Randy sez: The first three paragraphs happen in real time, a nice sequence of actions by Claude, the spectator in the raincoat, and the soldier. The fourth paragraph downshifts into super slow motion. It takes 29 words to describe one punch to the jaw. Shaw is breaking the rules here. What's his game?

Shaw's game is to give us a surreal little moment before the storm. It's the pause of the roller-coaster at the top of the tracks, just before the crazy descent. It's like the slow-motion clips in the old Kung Fu TV series. That's his game.

And it works. Because up till now, we weren't sure how well Tommy can fight. Now we see that he's a dangerous little snake. Tommy is in that mystical zone, where he sees the other guy moving like a glacier, where defeat is unthinkable. Let's watch the fight pick up to normal speed again:

There was no holding the soldier back now. "Okay, kid, you asked for it." He began to move in on Tom.

Tom retreated and the crowd pushed back behind him.

"Give them room," Claude called professionally. "Give the men room."

"Sidney, the girl called shrilly, "you'll kill him."

"Nah," the soldier said, "I'll just slap him around a little. Teach him a lesson."

Randy sez: The pace has come back to normal speed by bringing in some dialogue. It's a fairly brisk pace even so. We've got short paragraphs, verbs in simple past tense. A couple of adverbs have weaseled their way in. Now watch as Shaw accelerates the pace up to lightspeed and then back down to normal again:

Tom snaked in and hit the soldier with a short left hook to the head and went in deep to the belly with his right. The soldier let the air out of his lungs with a large, dry sound, as Tom danced back.

Randy sez: Notice the action-reaction here, with everything in sequence. Tom hits twice, then the soldier reacts, then Tom dances back. It happens almost in a blink, and then the pace slows again while the two fighters size each other up. Shaw works in a couple of beats from the anonymous onlookers:

"It's disgusting," a woman said. "A big oaf like that. Somebody ought to stop it."

"It's all right," her husband said. "He said he'd only slap him a couple of times."

Randy sez: A little irony here. The bystanders haven't figured out what we already know -- that Tom is completely in control of this fight. Now the action picks up again, but it's still in strict sequence, with the soldier swinging, then Tom, then the soldier reacting, then Tom hitting again, and then the action slows.

The soldier swung a slow, heavy right hand at Tom. Tom ducked under it and dug both his fists into the soldier's soft middle. The soldier bent almost double in pain and Tom hooked both hands to the face. The soldier began to spurt blood and he waved his hands feebly in front of him and tried to clinch. Contemptuously, Tom let the soldier grapple him, but kept his right hand free and clubbed at the soldier's kidneys. The soldier slowly went down to one knee. He looked up blearily at Tom through the blood that was flowing from his cut

forehead. The crowd was silent. Tom stepped back. He wasn't even breathing hard. There was a little glow under the light, blond fuzz on his cheeks.

Randy sez: Shaw has controlled the pace of this scene throughout, speeding up the action and then slowing it down exactly the way a real fight would happen. And you can see it all.

If you like fight scenes, this was a beauty. But it's not just mindless action. This scene gets us inside the skin of Tom and shows us his character. He's a vicious, animalistic punk, he's got fighting in his blood. And we LIKE him. More correctly, we identify with him. Even if we've never thrown a punch ourselves, we feel like we've just beaten up a bigger guy. You have to like Tommy, even if you don't like what he does.

Shaw has followed the rules, mostly, and violated them where it made sense -- to achieve an effect. Clever guy, Irwin Shaw.

Did you like that?

Randy has a lot more to teach.

[Check out his online writing courses.](#)