

Write Now!

Add Variety to the Pace and Rhythm of Your Story



The Author Series from Praeclarus Press



Telling a good story is largely a matter of training your “ear.” What sounds good? What keeps a reader’s interest? These are fairly subjective aspects of writing and may not be easy to master all at once. But any effort you invest here will pay off in a more readable tale. There are some specific techniques that you can use to add variety to the pace and rhythm of your writing. I’ve described three of these below.

Vary Sentence and Word Length

One way to move a story along is to vary the sentence and word length. While it’s generally better to have shorter sentences, throwing in a long one now and then can help the story move forward and provide interest. Similarly, short words are usually better than

long ones. But throwing in an occasional long word can make for good reading.

Write Like You Speak: The Cadence of Human Speech

Another way to add interest to your writing is to write like you speak. Using the natural cadence and rhythm of human speech will hold your readers’ interest and keep the story moving forward. To train your ear, start paying attention to conversations around you. What do they sound like?

While you don’t need to imitate all aspects of live speech, you might notice that the verb constructions tend to be active. In addition, people use contractions, put prepositions at the end of sentences, split infinitives, start paragraphs with “but,” and do all the naughty things your fifth grade teacher said would send you straight to hell. That’s because language is a living thing. Word usage changes, as does what is considered “proper” English. And whether we are aware of it or not, we get a lot of feedback when we speak. We can usually tell if we are boring people and will make adjustments in our constructions, expressions, tone, and vocabulary based on these subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) cues. With writing, there are no such cues. And so we feel free to blab on and on, blithely unaware that our readers have just lost consciousness.

Alternating Between Narrative and Summary

Another way to add interest is by alternating between narrative and summary. As I described last month, in one part of the story, you may have a first-person account. Then in the next part, you may draw back and use a third-person account to summarize what is going on. Or you might also try alternating between facts, action, third-person narration

and direct quotations. Even if you can't put the information in a person's voice, narration can keep this information from seeming dry.

Catherine Koverola and Subadra Panchanadeswaran alternated between narration and summary to great effect in a chapter they wrote for *Health Consequences of Abuse in the Family*. Their chapter was on barriers to care for women of color who were experiencing family violence. They started by telling the story of Maria.

At age 16, I came to the U.S. from Mexico. My parents had heard of a better life in the U.S., and they gave their life savings to the Coyote to bring me here. On the journey, I was raped repeatedly every night, as were most of the young girls. I became pregnant. Jose took me as his wife, and for three years he beat me daily. One day he left me, penniless and with two small children. (Koverola & Panchanadeswaran, 2004, p.49).

After telling Maria's story in her own words, the authors draw back and summarize the scene from the health care provider's perspective. They describe what happened after Maria came to the hospital with multiple injuries caused by her abusive husband.

Maria's road to healing began with the intervention of a Spanish-speaking medical practitioner who used the JCAHO recommended screening questions..... This particular healthcare practitioner followed the recommended protocol, of screening in private in the native language of the patient (Koverola & Panchanadeswaran, 2004, pp. 49-50).

By the time this chapter is finished, the authors have told us the stories of Maria, Tanya and Min. The final result was relaying a lot of information in a readable and moving way.

Summary

How you tell your story can impact how interesting it is. Using the cadence of human speech, alternating between different points of view, and varying your word and sentence length are three great techniques to help move your narrative along. With practice, these techniques will be second nature and will do much to move your story along.

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