Years ago, and this was after I’d been a professional novelist for at least three or four years, two very good friends of mine told me that they were going to give a workshop called The Writer vs The Storyteller. And one of them turned to me and said, “Which one are you? I’m guessing you are a writer, right?”

Up until that point, no one, including myself, had ever asked me that question. I didn’t even know separate labels existed. Once they’d explained to me the difference, my friend again said, “You are a writer, right?”

I said, “Ah, no, I’m a storyteller.”

And because I’m a storyteller, when I approach pacing, I’m not looking specifically to see whether my sentences, paragraphs, and chapters are short or long. I’m not doing color coding to figure out how much time I’m giving to description versus action and dialogue, except to know that I should mix it up.

Instead I rely almost exclusively on my understanding of storytelling, of how a story comes together and then propels toward a satisfying conclusion.

But nobody would know whether any story comes to a satisfying conclusion if they don’t read past the opening, so we are going to start this workshop right at the beginning.

The beginning.

For my birthday I had my husband buy me a subscription to MasterClass.com. And one of the courses there is taught by Margaret Atwood, who wrote The Handmaid’s Tale. In her class, Margaret Atwood relates an anecdote of her children, when they were little, putting on a play at home.

The play was about breakfast and involved the children asking one another, would you like some milk? Yes please. Would you like some cereal, yes please.

After some time of this, Margaret Atwood, in the audience, asked, is anything else going to happen? Kids said no. And she said, well, in that case, we are leaving and we’ll come back when something else is going to happen.

My first reaction was omg, you said that to little kids? My second reaction was, I wish I’d had the guts to say that when my kid was relating some endless story in which nothing really happened. Even if it’s your own kid, that shit is still boring.

But let’s go back to Margaret Atwood’s kids playing breakfast. Is there really nothing going on in kids offering each other breakfast? Obvious that’s not true. Dialogue is being spoken. Gestures take place. Food pass from one person to the next, etc., etc.

Something is going on. And what’s going on, according to Margaret Atwood, is a pattern. And a pattern is not a story, a pattern is normalcy. As she then go on to say, stories are patterns interrupted.

I loved that, but as I put her insight to use in this workshop, instead of interrupting the pattern, I keep saying disrupting the norm. So I’m just going to go with disrupting the norm from here on out.

The beginning of a book has to do many, many things. Introduce the world, introduce the characters, introduce the conflict, establish the tone, etc., etc.

From a storytelling point of view, the most importantly thing the beginning of a book does is disrupting the norm.

The first Harry Potter book, for example, establishes a pattern of normal life with the Dursleys, who don’t hold with anything strange and mysterious, and immediately has Mr. Dursley see, as he’s leaving for work one otherwise regular morning, a cat reading a map.

Norm disrupted.

In the Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen is going about her daily life. It’s a grim, dystopian life, poverty and oppression everywhere, but it is still her norm. And then her sister is chosen for the Hunger Games, Katniss volunteers in her sister’s place, and everything changes.

Most of us here have read craft books and gone to workshops. We understand that fiction is about disruption of the norm. The harder part is how we pace that.

The thing to remember is that pacing is only one aspect of your story.

If your story has a strong hook, i.e., teenagers in a dystopian future fighting to the death, gladiator style, or girl in love with a vampire who thirsts for her blood, then you already begin with an advantage: With that kind of hook on the back cover, pacing just has to not get in the way of the story.

Not all of us write stories with gigantic, life-and-death struggles. There are other qualities that you can give your book to give you more leeway terms of pacing. If you can suck your readers in right away with your world-building, or immediately make them care desperately about your characters, or if you have a great voice, and a lot of charm to your narrative, all these can make people want to keep reading your words, and which in turn make them more forgiving, whether your opening is slightly sluggish or slightly incomprehensible.

Openings can be sluggish or incomprehensible because we need to do two different things at the beginning of a book

1) Disrupt the norm

2) make your readers understand the norm and care about the significance of the disruption

If you are too slow to disrupt the norm, your opening will likely be sluggish. If you are too late in making your readers understand the norm and care about the significance of the disruption, your opening might veer toward the incomprehensible.

In more recent times, writers have been told to start your story as late in the timeline as possible. Basically as the disruption of the norm starts. Or even in the middle of that disruption.

At the same time they are told not to infodump.

I had a taste of this when I went to two conferences in a row that asked me to look at some pages from attendees. A lot of the stuff, especially those with a fantasy or paranormal bent, are not necessarily bad but somewhat taxing, in the sense that I felt like watching something going on in the semi-dark through a small, dirty window—I can sort of see stuff happening, but I don’t understand why or what for. It almost makes it worse if the characters have all those feelings. Because if I don’t understand the significance of the events that inspire those feelings, then I don’t know how to evaluate the feelings either.

That’s what can happen when you hold too closely to the rule of starting your book as late as possible, when you start that late because you’ve been told to do so, not because that makes for the best narrative choice.

If you start with the disruption, if you don’t let us see the norm at all, you actually rob the reader of some of the most pleasurable part of the story, the anticipation. Think of a rollercoaster ride, think of that climb up that first incline, knowing the big drop to come. That big drop wouldn’t be the same without the climb.

Think of movies like Jurassic Park and Independence Day. They start with the norm, and they let you enjoy the unraveling of the norm. I mean, the aliens don’t even start their attack right when they appear. They just hang there as you shove handfuls of popcorn in your mouth, leaning forward for the shit to hit the fan.

In the first Harry Potter, there is officially no prologue but chapter one takes place 11 years before chapter 2, so chapter two is actually where the story proper starts. And what’s chapter 2 about? Harry Potter’s horrible life with the Dursleys and some inexplicable stuff that happen around him. In other words, Harry’s norm. The letters from Hogwarts don’t show up until chapter 3, and Hagrid not until chapter 4. Because you had to spend time in Harry’s terrible norm, you cheer when the letters show up and you really cheer when Hagrid barges in.

Don’t be afraid of the norm. When agents are looking at those first ten pages, as much as anything else they are trying to assess whether you are in charge of your narrative. A confidently presented norm beats a confusing disruption any day of the week.

Pacing is kind of like the query letter, in a way. A lot of writers get nervous about the query letter, because they feel it has to be perfect. It doesn’t have to be perfect, it just has to be decent.

Same with pacing. Pacing just has to be good enough. And at the beginning of a book, it will always be a trade-off, between how fast you move on the events of your story, and how much explaining you do so that the events and the characters make sense to the reader.

So here are a few practical pointers, I hope, on beginning your book.

1. Begin with your greatest strength

I must have been on my third reread of Lord of the Rings when it struck me that the book begins with a fifteen-page prologue that is an anthropological treatise on hobbits. Very little of this prologue had to do with the actual plot of the book and if you skipped it entirely, you wouldn’t understand the rest of the story any less.

Yes, it’s insane to begin a book like that—I can only imagine how many people, over the years, picked up a copy of The Fellowship of the Ring out of idle curiosity and set it right back down when they plowed smack into that prologue.

Yet somehow it also makes all the sense in the world. Professor Tolkien opened with his greatest strength, world-building.

Terry Pratchett said something to the effect that not only was Lord of the Rings the best travelogue he’d ever read, it was some of the best traveling he’d ever done. So for every reader who rejected the book based on the prologue, there’s probably another who already feels transported at the end of the prologue, completely bewitched by the worldbuilding.

What is your greatest strength or strengths as a writer? Are you good at character-building, dialogue, humor? Do that right at the beginning of your book. Not that you should do so much of it that it interferes with the unspooling of your story, but there has got to be a way for you to open your book to your strength.

What if you go, but I’m really not sure what my greatest strength is. Or suppose your greatest strength isn’t something that can be showcased straight away at the beginning of the book?

Then I would advise you to begin with what you love to read.

1. Begin with what you love to read.

What kind of openings make you happy as a reader? I enjoy it when stories open with letters--or emails, as in the case of Alyssa Cole’s A Princess in Theory. I like it when stories open with newspaper accounts or excerpts from other fictional books.

I especially like it with openings that tell.

What do I mean by that?

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number 4, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you’d expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn’t hold with such nonsense.

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired: she went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine, then burst into flames and rolled down into the shallow creek at the bottom. Chunks of the bridge fell on top of it. Nothing much was left of her but charred smithereens.

These are openings that tell, rather than show. Maybe I like opening that tell because there is a primal pleasure in being *told* a story. Or maybe I like opening that tell because they lay things out for the reader, whereas openings that show need the reader to pay attention right away and figure things out for herself—and I’m lazy and prefer to be spoon fed.

In any case, I write a lot of openings that tell. Am I writing to my greatest strength? I’m actually not completely sure on that front. But I’m writing to my greatest preference. Pacing is personal, your own preference counts. It perhaps counts above all.

You should always feel free to disregard everything I say today—and everyday. You should especially feel free to disregard this next bullet point.

1. Tell me more

One of the things you hear over and over again as a writer is “Show, don’t tell.” We as novelist can bring a lot of power and finesse to our scenes by showing our story as it unfolds. So in general I follow that rule. But where I feel free to disregard it is in the beginning of a novel.

You need to get a lot of information across in the beginning of a story and showing, for all its power and finesse, isn’t the most efficient at getting a lot of information across. Especially if you also adhere to very strict POV rules, in which at any given point you only write about what one character is experiencing.

So an opening that shows is a view through a narrow lens whereas an opening that tells gives a panoramic view.

To continue with the film analogy, what do you think filmmakers get told when they go to film school, the equivalent of “Show, don’t tell”? They get told, don’t use voiceovers. Because that’s considered lazy/impure filmmaking. And guess what? Your favorite movies have voiceovers.

What does voiceover do? It tells you things you need to know about this movie up front. Not showing, telling. And it isn’t only book-to-movie adaptions like Lord of the Rings that begin with voiceovers, Avatar, for example, until recently the highest grossing movie of all time, not an adaptation, starts with a voiceover.

Why do voiceovers get used all the time? Because when you are setting up the basics of a story, telling is more efficient than showing. The opening crawl of Star Wars, not even a voiceover, is straight up telling. And in less than 100 words you know everything you need to know to be immersed in the story that follows.

I often use the literary equivalent of a voiceover, an omniscient third person narration in the first few pages that tells you about my characters and the conflict they will be embroiled in.

Now I don’t expect any of you to start writing openings that tell just because I like it—heck, I’ve been trying for a while to get my critique partner to give it a try and met no success at all. But in a class about pacing I feel obliged to point out that this option exists and used well, it can be a very useful tool in moving the opening of your story along at a faster pace and with greater clarity than you can by only showing.

What if you are like my critique partner? What if you have a boatload of information you need to get across and but you believe that once you tell, it’s straight to hell? Then here are a couple of trick you might consider.

1. Flash-forward

I’ve always given Twilight’s back blurb, which clearly establishes the conflict and emotional stakes of the “girl in love with a vampire who thirsts for her blood” story, a huge amount of credit for its success. But in fact, its actual opening does some good work too. The opening is a flash-forward to the very end of the book, when Bella is captured by some bad people. It’s only five paragraphs.

Last paragraph, “*The hunter smiled in a friendly way as he sauntered forward to kill me.”*

I once read somewhere that to be happy in life you need to have someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. To be a happy reader, you also need something to look forward to. And a flash-forward to a major climactic event, or at least a major turning point in the story, gives your readers something to anticipate.

And remember what we already said about anticipation? It’s one of the best things you can experience in reading a book.

Twilight’s flash-forward, along with the conflict clearly delineated in the back blurb, serve as excellent story hooks. The story itself might move at a somewhat leisurely speed, like that gradual climb in the first section of a roller coaster, but because you can see the big drop and the giant vertical loop up ahead, you actually don’t mind if you take a little longer to get there.

You can also do a flashforward for a story in which nobody is ever in danger of dying.

From my book THE LUCKIEST LADY IN LONDON, this is the end of the prologue, which you’ll notice does a lot of telling.

In 1885, when he turned twenty-five, he let out the word that he was ready to settle down with the right girl. The matrons heaved a collective sigh of relief. How wonderful. The boy actually understood his duties to God and country.

He had no intention of marrying, of course, until he was at least forty-five—a society that so worshiped the infernal institution of marriage deserved to be misled. Let them try to match-make. He did say the *right* girl, didn’t he? The right girl wouldn’t come along for twenty years, and she’d be a naïve, plump-chested chit of seventeen who worshipped the ground on which he trod.

Little could he guess that at twenty-eight, he would marry, out of the blue, a young lady who was quite some years removed from seventeen, neither naïve nor plump-chested, and who examined the ground on which he trod with a most suspicious eye, seeing villainy in everything he said and did.

Her name was Louisa Cantwell and she would be his undoing.

This mini-flash-forward me saying to the reader, keep reading. A big drop is coming.

1. Mini-disruption

I’m actually not sure what to call this kind of trick, so I’ll call it a mini-disruption. Unlike a flash-forward, a mini-disruption isn’t in the future of the actual opening of the story. It happens either before or around the same time as story proper.

For example, the first scene in Jurassic Park. It depicts a horrific workplace accident as a worker is mauled during the transfer of a newly arrived velociraptor. That accident is the reason the scientists played by Sam Neill, Laura Dern, and Jeff Goldblum will be brought to the park, so it’s backstory, but it also serves effectively as a foretaste of what’s to come.

As in, if it’s this bad right now, wait until you get into the meat of the story.

In any case, a mini-disruption serves the same function as the flashforward, which is that it makes your viewers/readers anticipate, which gives you some time to settle in to the norm of your story, and build to the actual big disruption

1. Backstory—Part I

Most writing rules came to be in reaction to the literary abuses that had taken place earlier. People used too many adverbs. People did too much telling. And people dumped too much backstory onto their readers.

So now backstory has a reputation almost as bad as that of adverbs and telling. You’ve been warned away from it, as in, don’t put in too much backstory, or don’t open your book with backstory.

Except story has a backstory. That is a given.

Not that I’m advising you to necessarily begin with backstory, but your favorite books and movies often begin with backstory, your children’s favorite books and movies too. Frozen, begins with backstory. The Incredibles begins with backstory. Beauty and Beast, absolutely.

Both of the Guardians of the Galaxy movies begin with backstory. Star Wars Rogue One, with the protagonist as a young girl, escaping the Empire’s grasp.

I can go on and on. The thing is, backstory, like adverbs and telling and head-hopping, are things writers warn one another about. Readers don’t care remotely as much.

I mean, when tens of millions of people trooped in to see movies I’ve named, did they think at the opening scenes, what, backstory again?

No, to them it’s all just story.

So backstory, in and of itself, not a problem.

Problem is always how you do backstory and how much.

Notice that this section is called Backstory Part I. Here we deal exclusively with scenarios when you open your book with backstory.

If you are going to do it, you might as well study The Lord of Scoundrels by Loretta Chase, long considered one of the best historical romance ever written. It begins with backstory about the hero’s childhood. Why? Because it’s relevant to the story. It is necessary for you to properly understand why her hero behaves the way he does.

As we said, in every story you’ll have to deal with backstory. If all or most of the backstory in your book can be told in ten, fifteen pages, if you are sure it is information that is crucial to the readers’ understanding of the rest of your story, then you might as well open with it.

Because if the information is truly crucial, and you don’t present it at the beginning, then you’ll have to interrupt the flow of your story at some future point to give it to your reader. In that case I’d rather do it now so as not to slow the pace of the main story.

Also, if the backstory left that big an impact, it was probably really dramatic stuff. And why not begin with dramatic stuff?

And I say ten, fifteen pages not because I really know how long a prologue ought to be, but because I don’t think it should be too long. Nobody minds if your prologue is only 2 pages, or even only half a page. But you probably should rethink your strategy if your prologue is 50 pages—I know I would.

We’ve spent a lot of time on the opening because if the readers don’t get past the opening, it doesn’t matter how good the rest of your book is. But once they get past the opening, congratulations, now the rest of the book needs to measure up.

The good news is, it isn’t necessarily any harder to continue than it is to start. The bad news is, you’ve all heard of the sagging middle and the unsatisfying ending.

If you write or read YA, you might have also heard of the term, the middle-book syndrome. There was a time when a lot of trilogies were published in YA, and the second book in a trilogy often didn’t measure up to the first book. I had a sad experience with one such trilogy. The first book was absolutely brilliant and blew me away. I gave up on the second book halfway through.

I’ve thought a lot since about why I gave up on the series. For a long time, all I could say was that it simply got too boring, too repetitive, until I came across Margaret Atwood’s anecdote about her children’s breakfast play, and that single brilliant sentence Story is Pattern Interrupted.

That was an aha moment.

It isn’t enough to interrupt the pattern once at the beginning of the book. You cannot stop interrupting the pattern.

Or, to put it into my own words, you cannot stop disrupting the norm.

Life veers toward the norm. No matter what kind of cataclysmic events happen, people quickly settle into a new norm. Same with stories. Stories also resettle into a new norm after a big disruption.

The middle book that had me throw up my hands and move on to something else? It settled into a norm and that norm wasn’t disrupted for at least 3/5 of the book, way too long to be stuck in the same place, storytelling wise.

In recent years I’ve been writing mysteries. Mysteries practically demand that the norm be disrupted repeatedly.

At the beginning of a mystery a body is discovered, that’s the disruption of the norm that gets the show on the road.

Next the police show up, witnesses and relevant parties are interviewed. Now we are in a new norm, the norm of the investigation.

Which we cannot let last too long. The police discover a shocking secret identity to the victim, that’s better. That disrupts the new norm. Just as things settle down again, the key suspect is found killed, overthrowing all the detective’s favorite theories. And then, when the police—and the readers—thought they had a handle on things, it turns out that the victim died at a different time than everyone thought he did, making everyone’s alibi useless. Back to the drawing board!

That’s mystery, what about romances, you say?

In a romance, it’s the relationship that needs to morph into something else at each disruption.

My first book is called Private Arrangements. It has a married but estranged couple as protagonists. The book opens with the first disruption. My two lovers have been apart for ten years, but now the wife has petitioned for divorce so she can marry another and the husband swoops back in town and sneers, not so fast. He has a condition, she has to give him an heir, or he is going to contest the divorce.

So at first, they just circle around each other, and snarl at each other. This is the roller coaster going up that initial climb.

When they do actually start the process of getting an heir, that’s a new disruption. And all sorts of deep emotions come unburied as they realize that the chemistry between them is as strong as ever.

The next big disruption comes when she tells him that there was no point in him trying to get her pregnant because she’s been using a dutch cap all along. And he tells her that actually, all along what he has been hoping for is a reconciliation.

His confession again changes the emotional landscape and she doesn’t know how to cope with it.

The next major disruption comes when he takes a gamble and says that you know what, I’m leaving. And I will no longer stand in your way if you truly want a divorce.

And that’s a disruption because it’s a big decision on the part of a man who at the beginning of the book had no scruples about leaning on all his male privileges to thwart her and also because it forces her to ask herself, now that this colossal obstacle has been removed, what she really wants.

That’s the last disruption before she makes her decision to reconcile with her husband and start a new life.

The progression in this story is first disruption gets them into the same house—second disruption gets them into the same bed—third disruption cracks them open emotionally and forces them to confront their past—the next disruption is him saying. you know what, I am going to make the greatest gamble of my life, I am going to trust you—and the last major decision in the book is her saying I am going to trust you too, even though it scares the bejesus out of me.

In a mystery, every time something disruptive happens, the detective is basically dealing with a new case, because everything she knows about the case has to be reexamined in light of the disruptive discovery. In a romance, every time something disruptive happens, your lead characters should be dealing with a new relationship to each other, because who they are to each other has changed substantially.

So where should you put in your disruptions then? If you are into the three- four- or five-act structure, you would probably call these disruptions turning points and you would probably already know where your turning points should be.

I can’t think in act structures, and I can’t outline for the life of me, so I kind of go by my feeling as a reader, as in, if I’m reading this story, I’d be bored if at roughly about this point if something major doesn’t happen. Then I take a look at what I’ve written and what I’ve been building toward, and I disrupt.

Build up

You might have seen this in high school English, this graph about plot structure. Status quo, rising action, climax, falling action, new status quo.

I made a new graph to better illustrate how I think of pacing.

Here’s the original norm, we build to the first disruption, at which point we level up to the next norm, so on and so forth.

Well, the height of this thing keeps increasing. What does this height represent? Some call it tension. You can also call it stakes. If you think about Private Arrangement, the emotional stakes go up with every disruption, because even though the hero and the heroine are trying to deny it, even to themselves, they are drawing closer and closer. And the closer they get, the more devastating it would be if they once again break each other’s heart.

You’ll notice that in this graph I have made the length of each new norm shorter. That’s how I would accelerate on the story level, making the entire narrative pick up pace as it hurtles toward the climax.

In theory I don’t want to spend more than ¼ of the story in any single norm. In practice I can’t always get a story to move at textbook speed. The place where I might have trouble holding down the length of a norm is at the very beginning, which is why I had learned all those tricks about what to do in the beginning to make my readers more patient. Some stories just require more setup and there isn’t always a good way around it. In which case you make your setup as readable as possible and make the payoff down the road as big and satisfying as possible, and then let go and let God.

2) Breathe

We don’t put too few disruptions in a book or set them too far apart, because readers will lose interest, as happened with me and that disappointing middle book.

We also don’t put too many disruptions in a book. Too many twists and turns will lessen the impact of each one, will make them start to feel gimmicky.

Between the disruptions, the story develops at a more incremental pace. This is where both the story and the reader, have a chance to settle a bit, to breathe.

This is especially necessary if you want to take your characters on a journey of change.

We’ve talked about what happens when one of these stretches last too long. But you can have the opposite problem too. What if your stretches of new norm are too short?

You’ve probably heard about the petition to remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with competent writers? I checked last week, and it had almost 1.7 million signatures.

I don’t know how to fix Game of Thrones. But I can point out, here in a pacing class, that in the last three episodes of Season 8, there was very little breathing room. We basically had disruption after disruption. And Spoiler alert! a major character, heroic for seven seasons, still heroic in episode 3 of Season 8, by episode 6 had turned into Hitler at the Nuremberg Rally.

I’ve seen some people say that the character arc has been foreshadowed.

If a romance hero is an asshole to the heroine until the last page of the book and then suddenly say I love you, and the readers say that’s bullshit, the writer can’t point to chapter 7 where he made her a sandwich and say but I foreshadowed it.

When you show a gun in act 1 and fire it in act 3, that’s foreshadowing. Foreshadowing is grossly insufficient for big character change. You have to show your characters changing.

You have to show it by giving sufficient space between major disruptions. These stretches are where your characters take stock of the changes that have taken place both around them and inside themselves. Where they adapt to their new circumstances and some newly discovered parts of themselves. Where events and interactions between characters plant the seeds for the next disruption.

If they are going to become better people, you show them learning to take care of others, you show both the difficulty and the satisfaction of the journey.

If they are going to become worse people, show them grappling with their conscience, show them getting used to going down a slippery slope, etc., etc.

Without the work you put in between disruptions, readers won’t believe the next big change. If fact, see how this becomes like a cliff face? Your reader’s enjoyment of your story will run into a wall.

Backstory—Part 2

I promised you we’ll talk more about backstory, didn’t I? When we talked about backstory earlier, it was in the case that you had a small amount of crucial backstory that can be given in a single prologue.

But what if you have an assload of backstory?

Did you know there is an entire genre that deals almost exclusively in backstory? Mysteries. If you think about it, once a body is found, mysteries become almost entirely backward looking. Everybody’s focus is solely on what happened in the hours and days before the murder for the who and the how, and what happened in the months and years leading up to the murder for the why.

Do you ever hear mystery readers complain about all this backstory?

Nope, because they are desperate for you to give it to them. Because they can’t understand what happened until they know all the relevant backstory.

(In most books I would advise you to be slightly wary about opening with the disruption, but I wouldn’t be concerned at all if you opened a mystery at the point of the disruption. Because the genre mandates that you are going to go back and get the norm!)

I’m a specialist in reunion romances, they almost always come with a ton of backstory, and I treat the backstory as a mystery writer would. I.e., when my reunion romance opens, I dump this lifeless relationship on the reader and go, look at this really really dead relationship and it used to be really really alive too.

Hopefully my readers will go, omg, what killed it? How?

And then I proceed with my dual timelines. The present time line will give hints, of course, but it is the past timeline that properly unravels it, the mystery of what happened.

But whether I can make a mystery out of it is predicated on whether the past I’m initially withholding is truly crucial to understanding the characters and their relationship.

My personal trick for making sure of that is that I don’t generate backstory until I need it. I only dig into the past when I absolute must, when the present narrative demands it, in order to explain who these characters are in the here and now and how their relationship came to be in the state it is in.

Scene placement

If you have a strong central plot, then it’s fairly easy to decide where scenes having to do with this plot goes, because a strong central plot has a timeline and a direction.

But occasionally, you have a scene that while absolutely necessary in the overall scheme of things, i.e., it lays the groundwork for a big disruption later on, or is unskippable in terms of character ARC, but isn’t itself firmly nailed down to any given time or event, then you have some leeway as to where it goes.

Where do you put it?

If you say, right after a big disruption, I’d say that you are mostly correctly.

A disruption is a shot of adrenaline to the reader’s attention. A big disruption is where they rub their hands and go, ooh, this story is really going somewhere. At that point, they are full of anticipation and you should take advantage of that anticipation to slide in a quieter scene.

If this scene is in the first 25% of the story, I’d say definitely put it after a big disruption. Because in the beginning of a story, you don’t want to delay the arrival of the disruption.

But if this scene is in the final 25% of the story, I might consider putting it right BEFORE a big disruption. If you have done your story-level acceleration correctly, if your stretches of norm have been getting shorter and shorter and your stakes getting higher and higher, then your reader should feel it in her bones that the climax of the story is bearing down upon her.

And she is already feeling tenser and turning the page faster and I can slide in this scene to delay the arrival of that next disruption a bit. To build suspense and further heighten tension.

Everything I’ve talked about so far is kind of at the story level, now we’ll get down to the line edit level and take a look at how you tighten pacing at the sentence and paragraph level.

At the line-edit stage, when the overall shape of your book is set and you are just doing better writing, you can take your pacing from good to better by using more precise words, trimming your sentences, punching up you dialogue, etc., etc.

But you won’t be able to, merely with language and writing technique, take your overall pacing from bad to good.

Good pacing happens at the skeletal, structural level of your story. If you haven’t built your plot and/or emotional conflict so that they level up and up in terms of tension and stakes, then improving individual lines or even individual scenes wouldn’t matter too much.

That said, there is a lot of value in tightening up your prose and being more strategic in where exactly you place the information that you must get across, especially in the beginning, when you are fighting the hardest to keep the reader’s attention.

So now I’ll show you an example where I received some really insightful editing.

This is from the opening of THE MAGNOLIA SWORD, my Mulan retelling, which comes out in September. I went through four or five different openings, most of them opened in various fashion on the day the nationwide conscription was announced. And one was a telling opening, in which I attempted to condense the backstory into one or two pages.

None of them were quite right.

Some people are good at writing beginnings, I’m much better at coming up with a beginning after I know the whole story. As the story took shape, I saw that okay, actually I need to better address the romance aspect of this story.

And I would best do that by showing a meeting between Mulan and this young man. By making that decision, I actually opened my story not on the day of the conscription, but two weeks earlier, elongating the timeline of the book, not typically advised.

Worse than that, due to the nature of the story, I would now open with a fight scene.

I love writing fight scenes, but I almost never open with fight scenes. Because in a fight scene opening you still need to impart relevant story information—who are these people, what are they doing, what’s the significance of everything and why should anyone care—while maintaining the integrity and tension of a fight scene.

That’s not walking and chewing gum at the same time. That’s riding a unicycle while juggling.

But sometimes stories make their own demands and so I bowed to the inevitable and got to work.

This fight scene opening is actually a mini-disruption, which we talked about when we talked about various ways to open your book. Like the first scene in Jurassic park, which I used as an example, this opening also hopefully lays some ground work, provides a taste of what is to come, whets the reader’s appetite, especially for the romance. And then we move on to the norm and then the big disruption of the conscription.

“Hua xiong-di, it has been a while,” murmurs the man in the predawn darkness, his shadow long in the feeble light cast by a pair of incongruously new lanterns that have been hung before the battered gate of a decaying temple.

He is wrong.

It *has* been nearly two years since we last crossed swords. But I am nobody’s xiong-di—brother—literal or figurative.

“Time passes like water,” I reply, drawing a shallow breath. “Have you been well, Nameless xiong?”

In those notes of his that somehow find their way into my hands, he has always referred to himself as the Humble Nameless. But I know who he is. I have known since I first laid eyes on his sword-lean, sword-sharp handwriting.

I have, however, refrained from addressing him as Yuan xiong, my opponent in the duel for which I have prepared my entire life.

A duel in which we are likely to maim, or even kill, each other.

159 words



133 words

“Hua *xiong-di*, it has been a while,” my opponent murmurs. In the feeble light, his shadow is long, menacing.

It *has* been nearly two years since we last crossed swords.

But I am nobody’s xiong-di. Nobody’s younger brother.

“Time passes like water,” I reply, drawing a shallow breath. “Have you been well, Nameless xiong?”

In those notes of his that somehow find their way into my hands, he has always referred to himself as the Humble Nameless. But I know who he is. I knew the moment I first laid eyes on his sword-lean, sword-sharp handwriting.

The one against whom I am fated to clash.

My hand tightens around the hilt of my blade—not the priceless family heirloom that lies at the root of the enmity between us, but only a bronze practice sword of identical length and weight.

140

So I’ll mention that this editor, Cheryl Klein, has a book on content editing called THE MAGIC WORDS: WRITING GREAT BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS. My critique partner loves it and she doesn’t write YA or children’s books, so I’m assuming the editing advice is applicable across genre and age lines.