

Welcome! In this session, we'll discuss horizontal and vertical storytelling techniques, how to identify them, and when to use these modes to improve pacing in your scenes.

As we settle in, jot down **one question you have about pacing** and **one thing** you think you **understand pretty well about it!**

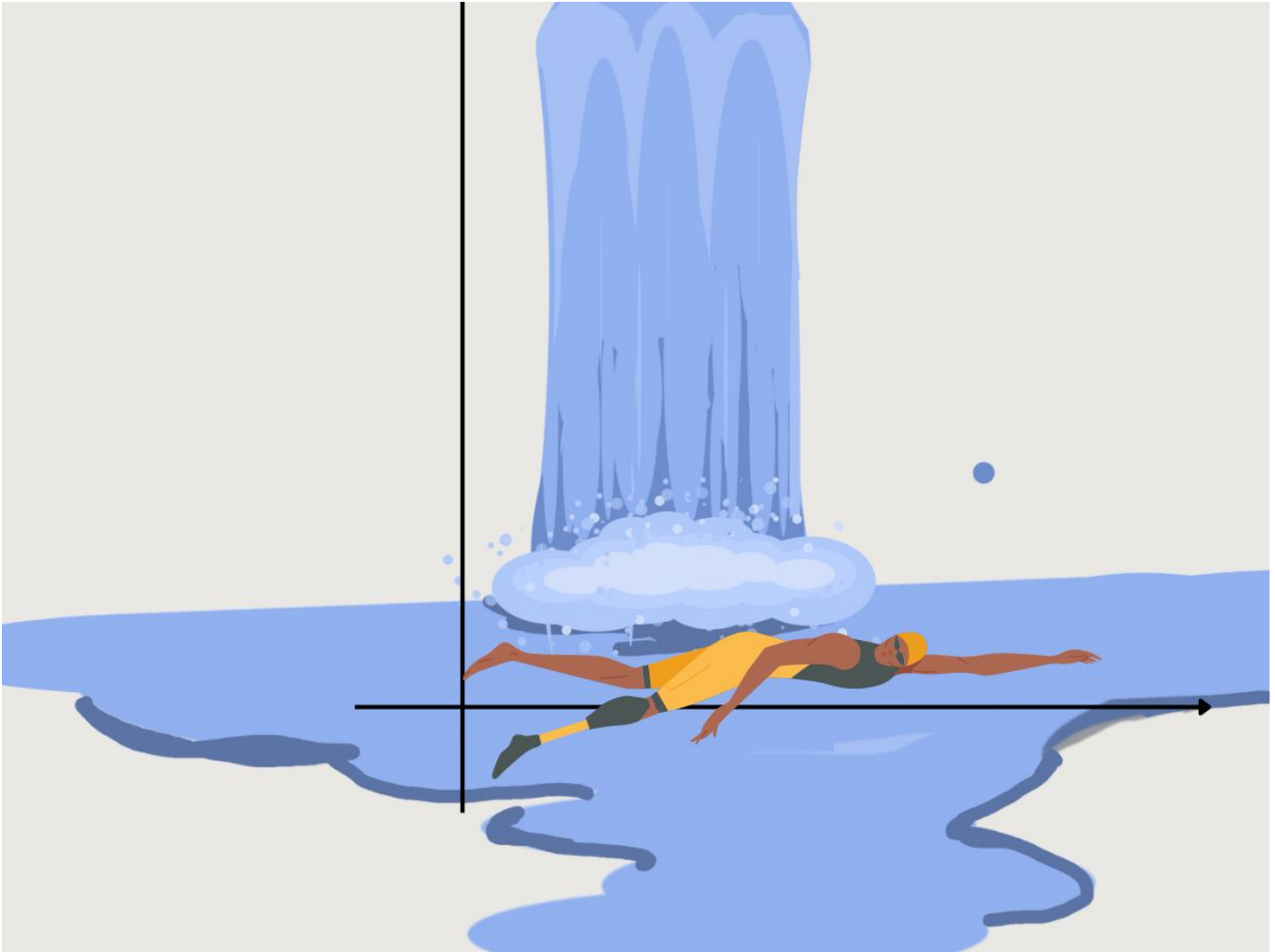
"Pacing refers to the rhythm of the entire story and how the chain of events fall into place. It's not necessarily the speed at which the story is told or the chapter length, but more how fast or slow the story is moving for the reader... A great story should have moments of climax and slower, steadier points.

How a story unfolds is something readers are conscious of, without always knowing why. Authors can use different tools to slow or speed up their pacing depending on what effect they are looking to achieve... Keeping your reader invested is vital; you want them to keep turning pages.

... Pacing helps build tension and atmosphere and should take your reader in the direction you wish them to go in, moving with the ebb and flow of your story. Correct pacing ensures action can be driven forward at key scenes and slowed down again, for more retrospective moments or sections which focus on character development." ([Jericho Writers](#)).

Some general facts regarding pacing to keep in mind for today:

1. The pacing of a scene should reflect the purpose of the scene.
2. Readers have some inherent pacing expectations related to genre or story arc—for example, they expect the climax to be fast paced, and they expect a memoir or women's fiction to be slower paced overall than a thriller.
3. Regarding item 3, each story still needs some of both moments strategically placed to help the reader take some breaths.
4. Readers need both downtime and action. Without downtime, they'll gasp for breath and lose track of things we need them to remember.
5. Slower-paced moments help readers process the information they've just read. We need this so they can follow the plot and complications.
6. Slower-paced scenes generally develop characters, atmosphere, mood and setting; they also relate complicated aspects of information or worldbuilding.
7. Faster-paced scenes generally move the plot forward quickly and can include/immerse readers in a scene/events. Both can do all of the above to some extent.
8. White space on the page generally increases pacing. Conversely, longer paragraphs and sentence structures generally slow down the pace.
9. A cliffhanger ending or scene break can abruptly change the pacing.



In a nutshell, **horizontal prose** is the "**what happens and when.**"

Imagine the reader flipping pages and progressing through the story, left to right.

Imagine the character swimming forward in plot, story events, and linear time.

Meanwhile, **vertical prose** relates the **how and why what happens matters.**

Imagine the reader's understanding of the character being deepened as they read.

Imagine the character swimming across great depths of backstory and motivation.

Vertical prose is about **deepening** the meaning, story, and characterization as the readers and characters move forward in the book and plot. Above, we can imagine the sky as the esoteric, larger connection to the human condition as it shelters and refills the depths of the characters' life story, subconscious, core self, and overall motivations.

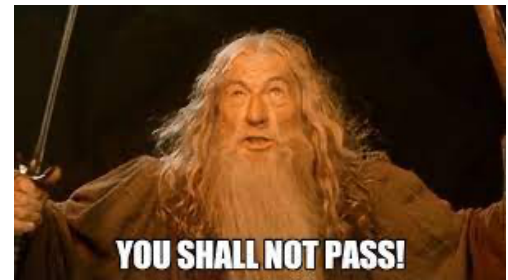
Here's the opening to *The Maze Runner*, which is almost completely horizontal.

"He began his new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

Metal ground against metal; a lurching shudder shook the floor beneath him. He fell down at the sudden movement and shuffled backward on his hands and feet, drops of sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool air. His back struck a hard metal wall; he slid along it until he hit the corner of the room. Sinking to the floor, he pulled his legs up tight against his body, hoping his eyes would soon adjust to the darkness.

With another jolt, the room jerked upward like an old lift in a mine shaft.

Harsh sounds of chains and pulleys, like the workings of an ancient steel factory, echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls with a hollow, tinny whine. The lightless elevator swayed back and forth as it ascended, turning the boy's stomach sour with nausea; a smell like burnt oil invaded his senses..."



Here are some ways we can create **vertical prose**.

1. Prologues and epilogues and forewords.
2. Direct narration focusing on characters/setting rather than what's happening in the plot
3. Internal dialogue (first person and third person)
4. Characters relating how they feel about something (reactions/discussions)
5. Backstory in general
6. Flashbacks (can be plot-based/horizontal in nature, but overall, flashbacks disrupt the overall horizontal movement)
7. Any kind of memory, association, or pontification on part of character
8. Authorial intrusion that provides context or insights
9. Descriptions of setting, worldbuilding, or other detailed narration that's not about action.
10. Research, authorial asides, footnotes, etc.

Now let's look at this passage from a YA apocalyptic novel. *The premise: the narrator, Kella is fleeing north on the Appalachian Trail with her older cousin (Jumper) and younger brother (Huck) and a gang of survivors during a plague in which many have turned into feral cannibals. Our heroes are about to cross a road where many cars were jammed while people fled cities.*

Identify what you think is **vertical vs horizontal** here.

1. Jumper calls us together. "We're nearing the crossing. Remember, Kella, that gun's a last resort. Don't shoot unless it's life or death, because if there are Hyenas around, we don't need them following us to Virginia."
2. We're here already? It's happening too fast. And it's so annoying that Jumper continuously reminds me firearms are loud. Or reminds me what a last resort means. I roll my eyes at Huck, looking to share this psychic, snarky comment, but he stares through me, pulling repeatedly at that lock of hair teasing his eyebrows. Huck's behavior could mean several things. It's about to rain, he needs a haircut, he's sick of me, or we're all dying very soon.
3. I'm scared now. I don't want to die a virgin. And the woods feel too, quiet, like they're trying to decide something. Jumper gives "us kids" his last annoying instructions about obvious horror-movie "don'ts," like not splitting up, screaming loudly, or setting off car alarms. We inch forward another few hundred yards. When we're close enough to see sunlight glinting on chrome, we crouch, peering through the trees. Both lanes are jammed with cars headed northwest, over the pass. A stench of something rotten reaches us. Huck gags and pulls his bandana over his nose.
4. Huck tugs his hair. "This is gonna be bumpy. All those bodies. All those unread books."
5. "Don't you even think about looting for books!" I hiss. But we're moving already. And we barely make it into the bright sunlight, barely set our tired feet on the searing pavement, when a car alarm rings through the valley.
6. Slingshot spins toward the sound. "Hyena must've woken up!"
7. Her comment is pretty obvious, since it's unlikely a gang of carjackers is on the loose, but I don't have long to be critical. Jumper puts his hand on my shoulder, orders me to draw my gun, and begins leading us across, swearing softly. As we creep toward the first row of cars, several Hyena heads appear. Apparently, these Hyenas, instead of sleeping in the nice shady woods like the wild animals we named them after, prefer sleeping under vehicles. I watch these Hyenas stretch in a very domesticated pet-like way, like giant housecats in the mood to play with chew-toys. It's spooky as hell.
8. Then one Hyena spots us. I can't decide if I should freeze or bolt, shoot or drop to the ground, grab Huck's hand or hold a weapon in each. I don't want to be a chew-toy.
9. "Go!" Slingshot commands.
10. "Wait!" Jumper commands right back. "Kella. Huck! Follow me! Close!"
11. We follow Jumper. The cars are five deep and often bumper to bumper. Hyenas pop up between vehicles. Random doors gape open, barricading us in. Rotting corpses litter the asphalt. The road isn't a road anymore. It's a nightmare version of Frogger. And we're the frogs. And the pavement is water. And the water is boiling and deadly.
12. These Hyenas aren't house pets. They're awake now, awake and hungry. Jumper and Slingshot flank us, clearing the way, moving bodies, fending off Hyenas with their knives. That sends them yowling in retreat. We thread and duck. We crawl and climb. We dart forward then turn back, scrambling over each other. Now we're blocked on both sides. Slingshot raises her gun, then lowers it again. Jumper opens a car door, sets off an alarm, cries out in pain, then ditches me to crawl inside. "Wait there!" he hisses.

13. I grab Huck by a dangling strap and yank him closer. His fingers drum his cheek. "Jumper just broke all three rules at once," he whispers.
14. Jumper is wild-eyed when he emerges. "Come on. Quick. Stay close!"
15. *Close.* My thoughts are closer now. Smaller. Reluctantly, I let go of Huck to crawl through the shocking heat of a car that's been broiling for two months. My backpack makes me huge and clumsy. I get stuck passing the gear shift. I twist to get loose. There's a body in the backseat, but the car doesn't reek. Did Jumper just—?
16. *No. Don't think about it.* We tunnel through more cars. Forward, backward, whatever it takes in this maze. We're three lanes in when a body on the pavement leaps up, revealing it's not the corpse I thought it was. Slingshot shoots it at close range, and Patel reels, holding his head from the report.
17. *Huck? Where's Huck?* There he is. More shadows to our right. No way backwards. Jumper sends me climbing up the rear wheel of a jacked-up pickup. I stifle a scream when my shin hits the scorching metal.
18. *Wait.* Huck. He's still on the ground. A Hyena is looming over him.
19. I turn off the safety.
20. I raise my gun.
21. I forget my own name.
22. Jumper grabs the Hyena from behind, shoves it into the car we just crawled through, throws the door closed, and we keep going.
23. Forward. Now left. Go. Now backward. Now straight. Stay close. Now a Hyena. Run. Huck? Forward again. Another shot. Our enemies thicken. We're forced to stop and fight. The Hyenas keep coming, but we hold the line. Diego struggles to thrust snapping jaws away from his face. Jumper performs the car maneuver again, and yowling screams pierce my brain. A Hyena grabs Gazer's leg. Slingshot takes it down with a clean knife-stroke. When a Hyena lunges for Jumper, its eyes wild and dead at the same time, I take a shot without hesitation.
24. Now the whole world is Hyenas. Jumper and Slingshot both start shooting, one on each side. I can't feel my body, just the strange weight of the gun in my hand. All my senses jumble. For a moment, I'm frozen, perceiving the world the way Huck must. Red and black; loud and quiet; snarl and snap; metal and silver; Jumper on my left — smooth stone and white blazes, Slingshot on my right — cold steel and glowing gunpowder — all around us the slicing bitterness of claws and anger and hunger—
25. *Don't shoot your friends. Don't shoot your friends.*
26. "Huck," I scream when I remember who I am again. "Huck, stay near me!"
27. "Stop screaming!" Jumper screams back at me.
28. *I hate this day. I really hate this day.*

- a. What do you think the author was trying to accomplish with this scene?
- b. Which prose seems horizontal? How and why?
- c. Which prose seems vertical? How and why?
- d. At a closer level, which sentences or even phrases or words might be vertical?
- e. Do you see any overlap?
- f. Is there a place where you think the vertical gets in the way of the desired pacing?

So, how do we know when to use vertical instead of horizontal? Well... back to pacing. *And* purpose. What were you trying to achieve with the scene or narration?

According to Scofield, "Scenes are those passages in narrative when we slow down and focus on an event in the story so that we are 'in the moment' with characters in action... Or we can say that a scene is a segment of story told in detail, the opposite of summarizing" (12).

Scenes have four components (Scofield 14-18).

1. **Event and emotion:** "In a scene, characters do things (act and react) that 'add up' meaningfully; and they feel things (have emotional and intellectual responses to the action). Thus, every scene has event and emotion" (Scofield 14).
2. **Function:** "There is a reason the passage is rendered in detail rather than summarized. There is a reason why it appears where it does in the sequence of events. It accomplishes something for the story. It changes something" (Scofield 15).
3. **Structure:** "In a key scene, a full scene, we have a mini-story. We can see that it starts and stops. ... We can take a broad-tipped pen and draw a box around it" (Scofield 16).
4. **Pulse:** "Some vibrancy in the story makes the scene live on the page and makes it matter to the reader" (Scofield 17).

- So, you'll ask yourself if your pacing fits the goals for your scene as a start.
- Then, if it doesn't, we'll add or remove vertical prose.
- Much of the time, you have plenty of vertical prose in your work and the prose can be moved around to suit your needs and affect pacing.
- If you don't have enough vertical prose, now is the time to start brainstorming about characterization!

"Vertical movement is what gives a narrative depth, texture, tension, and resonance. It interrupts the forward, chronological pace of a story or essay (*action--what* happened) and replaces simple linear movement with spatial complexity (*thought—the why* of the story). It represents the act of imagination—what propels us into the *imaginative leap*."
(https://public.wsu.edu/~hughesc/cwi_eng_vertical_horizontal.html#.)

Here are some pacing mistakes I see to watch out for:

Too much vertical:

1. A story begins with a long info dump or any kind, often worldbuilding, character backstory, or historical context. Or, any excessive use of this throughout the novel in which the pacing flags enough that the reader grows tired and yearns for horizontal movement.
2. A story or scene that begins with a very active line/plot point ("A wolf was running at me!") and then switches to what happened years ago. Can this work? Occasionally.
3. As you know moments in which characters deliver the why in a way that feels very clunky and transparent to the reader. Hint, have characters talk about/react to the info you need to impart while doing something and showing some horizontal movement.
4. Filtering an entire event in the vertical so that we only see a character's reaction to what's happening offscreen and not what is actually happening.
5. The # 1 mistake I see in action scenes is showing too much vertical DURING the scene. Likely, that's not the time for pontification or funny internal asides.
6. Summarized action falls in between this. Summarized action can be done well, but make sure not to summarize the best scenes!

Too much horizontal:

1. A story or scene that begins without any grounding for the reader to know where they are as they are moved into immediate plot.
2. Extensive description of battle scenes or strategies when the reader doesn't know who to root for or why a certain aspect/mission/event might be going wrong or right (lack of vertical understanding of resonance of a scene)
3. Essentially,