GIVE YOUR STORY A PULSE

Shaping pace so readers feel movement, pressure and room to breathe

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Inez had twelve minutes to find the missing costume trousers before the prince's entrance.

The author gave her four pages to explain the theatre's booking system.

The trousers remained missing. The prince was developing concerns. Somewhere in the stalls, a reader began wondering whether the interval would arrive before the story did.

Pacing concerns how a narrative moves through its material: what receives attention, what passes quickly, where pressure develops and where readers have time to absorb a change. It is not simply the speed at which people run across the page.

A quiet conversation can feel urgent. A chase can drag. A reflective chapter can provide exactly the breathing room a novel needs, while another reflective chapter explains a feeling readers understood three paragraphs ago.

The aim is a purposeful rhythm that suits this book. Before shortening every sentence, find out what kind of movement is missing.

DISTINGUISH SPEED FROM INTEREST

A fast event does not automatically create a fast reading experience. A character can fall down a staircase in a few seconds while the narration spends a page describing every banister.

That expansion might be deliberate. Perhaps the fall is the moment everything changes, and the slowed attention makes it vivid. Or perhaps the description simply interrupts an event readers want to follow.

Similarly, a character waiting for a difficult answer can hold attention without moving at all. Readers understand the question, care about the response and recognize the cost of the silence.

Ask what the reader is following. Is there a desire, uncertainty, developing perception or emotional pressure? If that connection is weak, cutting words may only produce a shorter version of a dull passage.

For Inez, finding the trousers gives immediate direction. The booking system might matter elsewhere. During the search, it needs a reason to enter her attention or a shorter route into the story.

WORK AT MORE THAN ONE SCALE

Pace operates across the whole book, within sequences, within scenes and through sentences. A problem at one level may not be repairable at another.

If the middle of the novel repeats the same unsuccessful attempt, brisk prose cannot supply the missing development. If a strong confrontation is buried beneath cumbersome explanation, rearranging the whole plot may be unnecessary.

Begin with the broadest useful question. Does the manuscript move through meaningful changes? Then examine how those changes are distributed and experienced.

You might find that several lively chapters produce little overall movement because the characters return to the same position each time. You might also find a chapter that looks uneventful in an outline but transforms a relationship through one conversation.

Use the outline and the reading experience together. Neither word count nor a summary of events can tell you everything about how a passage feels.

Choose the level of intervention that matches the actual problem.

GIVE A SEQUENCE A DIRECTION

A sequence of scenes needs more than a shared location. Look at what develops across it.

Inez begins by assuming the trousers have been misplaced. She discovers that someone borrowed the costume without permission. The search now requires a difficult conversation with the director's son. When he admits where he left it, she must decide whether to expose him or solve the problem quietly.

The practical task has become more complicated, and the social stakes have changed. Each encounter alters what can happen next.

If Inez simply searches five cupboards and finds nothing new, the sequence may need compression. One cupboard can establish frustration. A short summary can cover the next few. Save closer attention for the discovery or choice that changes the situation.

This does not mean every scene requires a reversal. It means checking whether the allotted space develops the reader's experience or merely repeats the starting condition with additional furniture.

CONTROL HOW MUCH TIME THE NARRATION SPENDS

Story time is the interval occupied by events in the fictional world. The space and attention used to narrate those events can expand or compress that interval.

A sentence can cover a month: "By the end of March, she had stopped checking the window whenever a car slowed outside."

A paragraph can linger over a few seconds: the sound of tyres, a hand on the curtain, the decision not to look.

Choose the treatment according to what matters. If readers need to experience the hesitation, give it room. If the essential point is the gradual change over several weeks, summary may serve better.

Expansion is not automatically padding, and compression is not automatically efficient storytelling. Both can be purposeful or misplaced.

Mark the moments you have narrated most closely. Are they the moments that deserve the greatest attention? A draft sometimes spends lavishly on the author's favourite arrival and rushes the decision that gives the chapter meaning.

LET SUMMARY CARRY THE JOURNEY WHEN THE JOURNEY IS NOT THE POINT

Writers sometimes dramatize every departure, journey, greeting and explanation because they worry that leaving anything out will confuse readers.

Readers need connections. They do not always need the complete transport arrangements.

Inez can check the dressing rooms in a sentence, provided nothing important happens during those checks. If one room contains the person she has been avoiding, that encounter may deserve a scene.

A useful transition supplies the relevant change in time, place or situation without rebuilding the world. "Ten minutes later, she found him behind the scenery shed" may be enough when the preceding passage has established whom she is seeking.

Do not compress away an emotional bridge merely because it contains no large external event. A short journey during which someone decides to confess may matter more than the destination.

Ask what readers need to experience and what they only need to know happened. That distinction can release substantial space without making the story feel hurried.

BUILD PRESSURE WITHOUT SHOUTING

Tension can arise from uncertainty, competing desires, limited options or the anticipation of a consequence. It does not require an emergency in every chapter.

Two people discussing whether to keep a shared home may generate considerable pressure if each answer changes what the other is prepared to admit. A loud argument can feel flat if the positions never develop.

Give the pressure a particular source. Inez does not merely feel stressed. The prince's entrance is approaching, the replacement costume will not fit and the person responsible expects her to conceal his mistake.

Now readers can understand the problem and assess her options.

Avoid repeatedly announcing that time is running out while allowing the scene to wander without consequence. A deadline has force when the available time affects decisions.

You can also create pressure through a narrowing emotional option: a character has one remaining opportunity to ask a question before someone leaves, or must accept that silence will itself communicate an answer.

LET INFORMATION ARRIVE WHERE IT CAN WORK

Background, explanation and description can sustain interest when they change understanding at the right moment. They slow a scene unhelpfully when they interrupt a developing experience without contributing to it.

Suppose Inez finds the trousers locked in a storage room. A brief explanation of why she cannot obtain the key now matters. A history of every previous person responsible for storage probably does not.

Ask what the information does here. Does it clarify an obstacle, alter a judgement, deepen a feeling or prepare a choice?

Sometimes a short direct explanation is the cleanest option. You do not have to distribute every fact through dialogue or disguise it as a memory.

Check the return to the immediate scene. If the reader has to reconstruct where everyone was standing before the explanation began, consider shortening or relocating it.

The aim is not to remove context. It is to make context available at the point where readers can use it.

USE SENTENCE RHYTHM WITH MEANING

Short sentences can create emphasis, abruptness or a sense of rapid movement. They can also become monotonous if every thought receives the same clipped treatment.

Longer sentences can carry accumulating action, hesitation or a rush of perception. They do not automatically make a passage slow.

Compare:

"Inez opened the cupboard. Empty. She opened the next. A crown fell out."

"By the time Inez had checked the cupboards, caught the falling crown and persuaded the assistant not to announce the crisis over the loudspeaker, the prince was waiting outside in his boots."

The first version isolates successive discoveries. The second compresses a series of events and lands on a new pressure. Either could suit the scene.

Read the passage for its actual effect. Look for repetition, awkward qualification or a sentence that hides the important action near its end without purpose.

Vary rhythm because the experience varies, rather than applying a rule that excitement must always arrive in tiny grammatical parcels.

MAKE DIALOGUE CHANGE THE SITUATION

A page of dialogue can read quickly while contributing little. Speed through the lines is not the same as movement through the scene.

Check what each speaker wants and how the exchange changes their position. Does a question produce information, resistance, a new demand or a meaningful refusal?

If Inez asks where the costume is and receives several variations of "I don't know," you may only need one or two. If each answer reveals a different reason for concealing something, the conversation can develop through apparent repetition.

Action beats and pauses also affect rhythm. Use enough to orient readers and make behaviour legible, but avoid attaching a small gesture to every line. A conversation can become congested with people adjusting objects no one needs adjusted.

Conversely, a crucial silence may deserve space. Let readers understand what is being withheld and why the next response matters. The pause then becomes part of the interaction rather than a gap in it.

ALLOW AFTERMATH TO ALTER THE NEXT MOVE

After an important event, characters may need to absorb what happened. Readers may need that space too.

A quiet scene can turn shock into understanding, show the cost of success or produce the next decision. It becomes less useful when it restates the event and explains the same emotion without development.

After Inez finds the costume, she might sit alone while the performance begins. The practical crisis is over. Now she realizes that solving it quietly has allowed someone to blame a junior assistant.

The pause creates a new understanding and a choice. Its value does not depend on trousers remaining missing.

Look at reflective passages for movement of thought. Does the character recognize something, resist it, reconsider or decide? Reflection can be active without turning into a speech about personal growth.

Do not cut every moment of stillness in pursuit of pace. A book that never lets consequences register may feel rushed even when all the events are present.

LOOK FOR PRESSURE THAT NEVER CHANGES

Constant intensity can flatten the difference between incidents. If every chapter ends with imminent disaster, readers may begin expecting the next escape rather than experiencing its uncertainty.

Vary the source and scale of pressure. A dangerous task can be followed by a difficult negotiation, an apparent success or a discovery that changes the meaning of the danger.

A quieter interval can preserve forward interest through a question or changed relationship. It does not have to suspend the story completely.

Similarly, repeated delays can weaken urgency. If the book keeps promising an encounter and finding unrelated reasons to postpone it, consider allowing the encounter to happen. Its consequences may provide more useful story than another interruption.

Ask whether the narrative is developing anticipation or merely extending it. The distinction becomes clearer when you identify what readers learn or experience during the wait.

Movement can come from a change in understanding as well as a change in circumstances.

MAP THE READER'S EXPERIENCE, NOT ONLY THE CHAPTER LENGTHS

For a manuscript-level check, make a brief note beside each substantial scene: the main question, the pressure, the significant change and the feeling you intend to leave.

Read the notes in order. Look for long stretches of the same emotional register, repeated discoveries or important consequences with no room to settle.

Chapter length can flag a place to inspect, but avoid imposing equal sizes. A short chapter can feel slow if its purpose is unclear. A long one can sustain attention through developing choices and pressures.

Compare the map with a continuous read. Note where you wanted more time and where your attention drifted. A trusted reader can provide useful reactions without needing to diagnose the repair.

Ask where they became impatient, where they felt rushed and what they wanted to happen next. These responses help identify the experience. Your task is to decide which changes will serve the intended book.

TRY ONE SCENE AT TWO TEMPOS

Choose a scene that feels sluggish or rushed. Save the original, then write two experimental versions.

In the first, compress routine actions, repeated information and transitions. Keep the central decision and enough orientation to follow it. In the second, give the decisive moment more room through perception, interaction or consequence.

You may discover that the scene needs both treatments: less space around the routine activity and more at the point that matters.

For Inez, that could mean a sentence covering several unsuccessful searches and a full exchange with the person who borrowed the costume. The revised scene may be shorter overall while allowing the important encounter to feel less hurried.

Read both versions with their neighbouring scenes. Pace belongs to a sequence, not only a page. Keep the changes that clarify and strengthen the experience rather than whichever version has the more impressive word-count reduction.

Your story needs a pulse, not a stopwatch attached to every paragraph. Give readers movement they can follow, pressure they can understand and room to feel what the movement changes.

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