



# Improve your fiction with FILM TECHNIQUES

You can borrow from a rich array of director's tools, including panoramic shots, close-ups, detailed physical action and dramatic high points

By Meredith Sue Willis

**ONE OF THE BIGGEST** mistakes beginning writers make is to work as if they had a director and actors standing by to give life to their story. The fact is that the writer of fiction is the whole crew: director, actors, camera operator—everything. This is the joy and challenge of fiction. You the writer are responsible for the smallest gesture, the largest explosion, and the story arc. It's all yours—and it's all made of words. But you can also borrow techniques from film to write better. Here's how.

**1 Use an imaginary movie to sharpen your physical action.** Film is terrific at showing physical action, movement—there's a reason they're called "movies." Film gives the action directly—the car careening through the streets, the play of muscle in the boxer's biceps. It will always be better than fiction at the direct display of movement, but fiction writers can improve their own action writing by imagining it as a film.

Try thinking of a scene with action in it: The main character flees danger; someone punches someone else; a chef chops onions. Put this scene on a movie

screen in your imagination and notice first the camera angle. How far are we from the figures? How much do we see? For a fight, you're likely to see whole bodies, but for chopping onions, probably just the hands and knife. In your imagination, slow the action and observe it in order, then write exactly what you see in as much detail as possible:

She gripped the slippery white sphere of onion with the extended fingers of her left hand. Then with her right hand, she brought down the full weight of the chef's knife, splitting the onion in half, just missing the tips of her fingers.

At this point, overwrite. Later, come back and cull everything but the most vivid details.

**2 Write settings as panoramic long shots.** Like the depiction of action, scenery is one of the movies' great strengths. Stunning wide-angle views of plains, mountains and galloping horses are a major reason Westerns were successful for so long. I love films that open with a bird's-eye view of a recognizable landmark, say the Golden Gate Bridge, and then have the camera zoom in close among cars and people on the busy streets. This kind of camera movement establishes place and spatial relations efficiently and beautifully. We even get information about what decade we're in from the cars and the people's clothing styles.

In fiction, we can also do this very efficiently, although without the stunning visual beauty, by simply writing, "It was

a sunny Monday morning in San Francisco in 1940.” We miss the sensual pleasure of the panorama and the zooming, but we do have the advantage of the intimate senses that we’ll discuss in step 7.

The big panoramas, by the way, and the various camera angles were prefigured by 19th-century novels. Take a look at the opening of Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations*. Early on you get a grim, flat, distant seascape, and then there is a sudden, horrifying close-up of the face of an escaped convict springing from among the tombstones.

Some fiction writers still use highly descriptive panoramic scene settings as a stylistic choice (Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian*, for example), but fiction writers generally describe setting with restraint because today’s readers a) tend to be less patient with long descriptions and b) have more images of places and scenery already in their minds thanks to film and television.

Do try an occasional wide-angle panorama in your fiction, especially when you’re establishing a scene. Imagine that movie screen in your mind again, and have your character cross a crowded room or busy street. Give a sense of the whole place (weather, season, angle of light, number and types of people, sounds, furniture). Then add material, such as additional people closer to the character (mid-shot), and then move in close as the character is jostled by the crowd or smells food in a restaurant.

Another version of this would be a scene where the narrator or main character is in a high place—an overlook, a mountaintop, a skyscraper. Have your character look out as at a movie screen, take a broad panning view, then focus on one aspect or object. Describe that object from the character’s point of view and then perhaps have the character associate, speculate or remember. These are natural patterns for how people get a sense of their surroundings—psychologically accurate, and also a great way to simultaneously establish the setting.

**3 Find the beat and raise the stakes.** One way of looking at structure in any narrative (film script, story, novel or even memoir) is to count the dramatic high points

or “beats.” All stories have rhythm—dramatic highs separated by narration, comic relief, description, internal monologue. List the beats, the high points, of your story as you might do in a screenwriting class. What are your big scenes? The first time they meet? Their first fight? The night she gets drunk when she realizes she made a mistake in throwing him out? Next, try a screenwriter’s trick of “scribbling” each scene. This is basically a super-quick word sketch of all the elements of the scene: where it takes place, who is there, what the tension is, a few scraps of dialogue. You scribble rapidly, and then as soon after scribbling as possible, write a draft of each scene.

Another structuring trick you’ll notice in the movies is that the stakes get higher and higher. If a stranger is murdered in Scene 1, then by Scene 3 the hero will be personally threatened, and then even the hero’s daughter is taken hostage. This structure works well even for stories and novels that are not thrillers. As the character moves through life, for example, he gets deeper in debt through his gambling and is tempted to steal to cover the debts.

Keep in mind that looking at beats and raising the stakes works best for fiction writers once they’ve drafted a good chunk of the story. I am suggesting, in other words, a way to push forward and revise rather than making a rigid, formulaic plan and sticking to it. One of the strengths of fiction is that you can make major changes right up to the end—much cheaper in fiction than film!

**4 Control your vertigo shots.** The vertigo shot is one in which the camera zooms in and out or swirls around and causes dizziness or even nausea in the viewer. It isn’t used a lot, but when it is used, it expresses illness, anguish or perhaps a drugged state. The main character in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo* suffers from debilitating dizziness, for example, and when he has to climb steps, the camera uses a vertigo shot.

In writing fiction, you can create a similar disorder by mentioning objects without a logical progression: *People dancing. Her face. The gun.* The trick is

to do this only when you need it for your story—when it works for your story’s rhythm. You need to be in control. For example, consider this sentence, which is not meant to be vertiginous:

She stood nervously at the edge of the marketplace. She saw his huge scarred hands, a large stack of oranges on a cart in the middle of the plaza, and the sun on colorful serapes piled up for the tourists. He started to walk toward her from the far side of the plaza.

The details here are OK, but the order is all wrong if the character is in her right mind. A plaza is a big place, and she is highly unlikely to see his hands at that distance. The natural order of seeing would be more like:

She stood nervously on the edge of the marketplace. The sun beat down on colorful serapes piled up for the tourists. Then she saw him on the far side of the plaza. He came toward her, passing a large stack of oranges and slowly forming his large scarred hands into fists.

The details were fine in the first version, and I could even imagine a piece of writing in which the character was so nervous she didn’t see the plaza at all, only his hands, but the trick is to revise it to make it work for your story.

**5 Master smooth transitions.** One of the most useful things film has given fiction is the clean, quick transition called the jump cut. In the movies, the camera stops, and the next thing the audience sees is the beginning of a new scene—we move from one thing to another, usually a new setting, and usually with a compression of time. In fiction, we do this by simply skipping a line, or moving on with no special transition at all: *Grimly, she put on her hat and coat and left the house. The man in the trench coat was waiting for her in the restaurant.*

Sometimes that’s all it takes. We can also, if we want, especially if a lot of time passes, use a double helping of white space to emphasize the change, but in the example I just mentioned, there is no problem with clarity. You

## WORKOUT

**HERE IS A GOOD** exercise for capturing the structure and shape of your story. Imagine that you get on an elevator with an agent or editor. You have a captive audience for 45 seconds until the elevator reaches the next floor. Your challenge: Tell your story in 45 seconds.

The agent is uninterested in your beautiful descriptions or even your funny dialogue. The agent wants to know the situation and the climax.

—M.S.W.

certainly don't need to describe how the woman opened and locked the door and hailed a taxi to the restaurant unless you have good reason. Other film transitions include the voice-over that orients us by telling us where we are, or a plain "Ten years later" title on the screen. That sort of transition works even better in fiction. *She didn't see him again until 10 years later when she was on assignment for The Times in Paris.*

The movies often indicate transitions with an establishing shot of a new location, and you can do the same thing in your fiction with a brief setting: *Frankie drove down to the seedy waterfront neighborhood, passed the bar, and parked a block away.* This summary, like a movie shot showing the same thing, gives a lot of information quickly: what the place looks like, the fact that Frankie has not come by public transportation, a hint that he may be avoiding someone.

We could, alternatively, go straight to action: *When he arrived at the Wharf Rat Bar, Frankie slammed his fist on the bar and ordered a beer.* Or, there might be reasons not to show the action but simply to narrate: *Frankie arrived at the Wharf Rat Bar, still seething with anger, and ordered a drink.* For a different tone, you could also use a transition with some backstory that adds distance and perspective, something like: *The last time Frankie was in the Wharf Rat Bar he had been with his best friend Bo, back before it all happened.*

Try choosing a point in your story that has two passages separated in time,

and experiment with several transitions: a film-style jump cut, either with extra white space or not; a change in mood; a brief narration of how the character got from one place to another. Have one transition that is abrupt, and one that takes the long view and gives perspective. Which one does the best job of setting up what comes next in your story?

**6** **Revise for continuity.** Movie credits usually include someone whose job was continuity—to make sure the final cut appears continuous. That is, if several shots were made at different times and spliced together to create a conversation in a hotel room, the ashtray has to stay on the same corner of the coffee table, and the heroine needs to wear the same pearl earrings. For fiction, you the writer are the continuity person, along with everything else. You need, especially in longer works like novels, to make sure the bully's eyes are knife-blade gray at the end if they started out that way.

One way to handle this is to do a skim-reading or to keep detailed files of characteristics. You can also do a computer search for a character's name and go through your entire draft reading just the appearances of that character. Have you added a new detail each time the character appears? Have you repeated yourself? A little repetition in a novel can be useful, but you don't want large identical chunks of description that give a reader an unpleasant sense of *déjà vu*.

**7** **Maximize the advantages fiction has over film.** Most of the steps in this article have borrowed from film, but there are areas where prose has enormous advantages. One is the intimate senses: smell, touch and taste. When your character enters a bar, hit the reader with the powerful odor of yeast and old beer. Describe the springy pudginess of a baby's feet. Movies are superbly visual, and their soundtracks are often remembered after the movie has been forgotten, but their forays into Smell-O-Rama have been crude at best. Fiction writers, though, can go deep into characters' experience with touch, smell and taste.

Fiction can also deepen the story

with interior action. In fiction, you can appeal directly to the reader's powerful imagination and provide characters' thoughts and memories. Suppose you've written a fight scene. In a few words you can tell us what is happening inside our hero as well as what the fight looks like:

The blow to his shoulder brought tears to his eyes and an impulse to turn and run. Not this time, he thought. I'm not running any more.

Another area where nothing does it better than fiction is playing with time. You can leap into the past through characters' memories or simple narration. You can foreshadow the future or slow down a moment. Many fine writers are masters of this kind of time travel.

Slowing down time, recapturing the past, reframing the past—these are among the reasons people write fiction. I am not, by the way, encouraging long passages of stream of consciousness or interior monologue (unless that's something you particularly like to write). I am simply saying that even in the middle of action—during the battle or as the character runs to catch a bus—his or her mind is active and rich with ideas and impressions. Don't forget the soldier's terror, the long-distance runner's flashbacks. The characters' interior lives are one special strength of fiction.

And it is why we write fiction, isn't it? To capture that interplay between internal experience and the events and people external to us. Fiction writers work by seeing many angles, doing many things, at once—we go inside minds, we explore the real past and imagine a different one. We invent new futures. We discover and then share the rich satisfactions of story.

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Meredith Sue Willis has two books due out this year, *Ten Strategies to Write a Novel* and *Out of the Mountains*, a book of short stories set in Appalachia. She teaches at New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

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