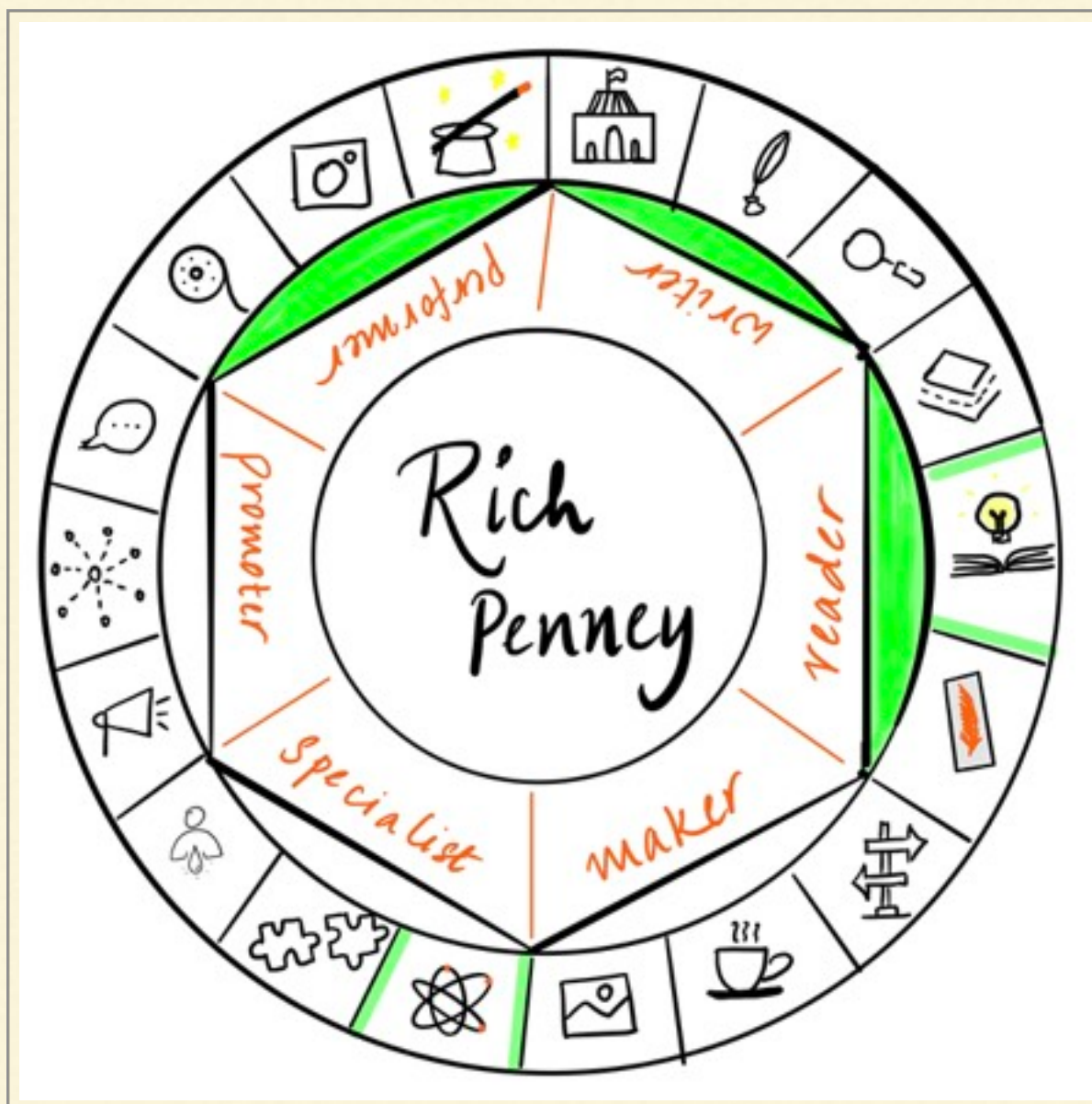

How to Write an Action Scene

Rich Penney



“If you are looking for a diverse set of characters, an amazing storyline and jaw-dropping action scenes, you have to read Desa Kincaid: Bounty Hunter.” That was how Kriti began her review of my novel. Since then, I’ve received many more reviews, and almost every single one of them mentions the action scenes. A lot of people wonder how I do it. Well, today, you’re going to learn.

I’m Rich Penney, and this is my masterclass.



1

Speed

A fast pace is necessary to capture the emotional flow of the scene. Your character's life is on the line. People are shooting at her or throwing magic at her or any number of a thousand things that could kill her. Take a moment and imagine this.

You're in a forest. Thick trees rise up all around you, their leaves fluttering in the wind. It's hot and muggy; you can feel the sweat on your brow. The mud is soft under your shoes. If you're not careful, you could slip. You've been running for an hour. There's nothing you want more than to stop and catch your breath, but that's not an option.

You have just stolen a priceless artifact from a man who desecrates ancient burial sites, and he has sent his best henchman after you.

You can see the guy coming. He's tall, pale with graying hair, and he wears a leather jacket. You catch a brief glimpse of him as he raises his gun and points it at you. Desperate, you duck behind a thick oak tree. The gun goes off.

A bullet rushes past you, scraping bark off the trunk.

Now pause.

What happens next?

In my experience, a lot of authors get sidetracked at a moment like this. They have the main character think about his love interest. Or they use this as an opportunity to tell you more about what the artifact is, why it's so important. All of that stuff is great, but not when the character is in a life-or-death situation. The character's thoughts should fit the context. They should be frantic, disjointed. A sentence or two here or there can have a real emotional punch. "Celia doesn't know I'm out here... What will she think if I don't come home?"

Now stop! Right there! You're done. **(Short, declarative sentences. They are your best friend when you are writing action scenes)**. Don't have the character try to answer his own question. Don't let him drift off into some reverie. Stay in the moment. Keep his attention focused on the immediate problem.

An action scene is about what your character is DOING, not what he is thinking. It's called an action scene for a reason.

There is one rule I follow religiously when I'm trying to create suspense: always ask yourself "What would happen if I actually did this?" If you stood around thinking about your girlfriend while a man with a gun was closing in on you, he would sneak up on you, and he would kill you.

Some authors try to cheat, using the fluidity of time as a get out of jail free card. Now, what do I mean by "the fluidity of time?"

Well, picture this.

At last, the tunnel opened into a massive room with a hole in the ceiling, allowing sunlight to filter in through the base of the crystal. It cast sparkling patterns on the stone walls, each one unique and magnificent.

In the centre of the room, a raised floor that stood only a hair's breadth taller than Desa herself was positioned directly under the crystal. There were unlit torches at all four corners; so, it was an altar of some kind.

Bendarian stood there with hands clasped behind himself, smiling down at her as he watched her approach. It was Bendarian – she knew that without a doubt – but he looked nothing like the man she remembered.

It took you about thirty seconds (give or take) to read all of that, but Desa visually processed what she saw in about one second. Time for the character doesn't flow at the same rate as time for the reader. Intuitively, we all understand this. But some authors push it too far.

Returning to our example of the young hero hiding behind a tree while a man with a gun closes in on him, some authors will exploit the fluidity of time to give you a page and a half about the hero's girlfriend and how sad he is that might never see her again. They'll do this with the tacit understanding that he had all of these complex thoughts in the space of three seconds. The intention is to create an emotional connection, to get you invested in the hero's plight, but the sad irony is that it often has the opposite effect.

Putting aside the believability of whether the character could think up a six-hundred-word essay in eloquent prose while he is afraid for his life, this diversion from the main thrust of the scene completely kills the suspense.

We were getting invested. We heard the gunshot; we saw the bad guy getting closer. It triggered these primal fight-or-flight instincts. The reader's heart rate is starting to speed up. And then all of a sudden...

“I've known Celia ever since our first year of college. The first time I looked into her gorgeous, blue eyes, I knew she was the one. Call me a hopeless romantic, but when you know, you know. That our story should end like this, with my corpse lying in the forest while Celia fills out a missing person's report, is tragic. Fate, it seems, is a cruel mistress. If I could just speak to her one more-”

No!

No! No! No!

The emotional flavor of this info-dump – which is supposed to be touching and melancholy – is completely at odds with the suspense that you were building up a moment earlier. The reader cannot switch back and forth between them.

The suspense you felt as you pictured the bad guy creeping closer with his gun in hand doesn't just stay on hold in the back of your mind. It fades to be replaced with new emotions depending on what you're reading.

When the action resumes, the reader is no longer in the right frame of mind for it. The author has to build that suspense back up again, and they often do a poor job of it. Hence speed. When someone is shooting at you, it doesn't happen at a lethargic pace. It happens at a frantic pace. Stay in the moment. Keep the narrative tight. Build the suspense and stick with the scene until you've reached its resolution.

“Okay, Rich, but when should I develop my character's relationship with his girlfriend?”

Literally any other time.

Okay, so now we've covered the principle of speed. See next chapter for clarity.



2

Clarity

Welcome back to my class on how to write intense, cinematic action scenes. Last time, we covered the principle of speed, the importance of using a fast pace to maintain a sense of tension and suspense. This time, we're going to talk about clarity.

First, a brief note on why clarity is important.

An action scene is a puzzle. You've put your character into a situation where her life is in jeopardy, and she must escape that situation according to the rules that you have laid out. Some of those rules will be implicit, based on a common-sense understanding of the context; others will be explicitly stated in the narrative. Preferably at a time that is not in the middle of the action scene.

For example: your character is hiding behind some rocks. There's a man with a knife on the other side who wants to kill her. If she can get past him, she will hop on her motorcycle and ride to safety. The rules then are simple. If

the man captures her (or kills her), she loses. If she eludes him, she wins.

The pleasure in reading an action scene comes from watching the character solve the puzzle, using the tools at her disposal. And thus, the method by which she solves that puzzle must be clear to the reader.

Perhaps she solves the puzzle by directly confronting her attacker and using her knowledge of martial arts to disarm him. Or perhaps she tries to sneak away.

Let's say you want to go the former route. Your character steps out from behind the rocks, puts up her fists, and challenges him. I've written hundreds of scenes like this.

So, a few guidelines to make your fight easy to picture.

1 Keep in simple.

I'm a huge fan of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Once, during my college years, I read one of the novels that went along with the tv series. I will never forget this extremely clunky sentence. "Buffy performed an inside to outside hook-kick that stunned the vampire."

Maybe you're wondering what exactly you're supposed to imagine here.

Well, fortunately, I did three years of Tae Kwon Do; so, I'm pretty sure I know what the author is trying to describe. What Buffy did is lift her leg up, hit the vampire's cheek with the side of her foot, and then bring her leg back down again. Note, my last sentence. How awkward it is to describe body movements in this way. Also, note that the author doesn't tell us Buffy's target. I'm inferring that by the fact that the vampire is stunned.

What about the "inside to outside" part? Well...If Buffy used her right leg, then the motion was from left (the inside of her foot) to right (the outside of her foot). If she used her left leg, the motion is from right to left. "Outside to inside" would be the opposite.

And all of this is needless, superfluous detail. Now, compare that clunky nonsense to this.

"She punched him in the face."

Simple, straightforward. Everybody knows what a punch looks like. You don't need to describe the individual motions of each joint. The reader needs two things to imagine

what is happening: the action and the target. The action is a punch, the target is the man's face.

“But, Rich, I can’t just write a scene that is two people punching each other over and over.” True. That would get boring. But most basic attacks are easy to describe. Observe.

Azra threw a punch.

Desa ducked and felt a whoosh of air above her head. She sent a pair of jabs into Azra’s stomach, then hopped and delivered an uppercut to the chin. The other woman’s head jerked backward. She stumbled.

Desa spun for a back-kick, driving her foot into the other woman’s chest. The impact sent her opponent careening toward the wall.

Falling over backward, Azra rose into a handstand. She brought her legs down and flipped upright. Her arm was a blur as she drew a knife from her belt and threw it.

Glittering steel tumbled through the air.

Leaning back, Desa brought both hands up to catch the knife between clapped palms. The tip of the blade hung an inch away from her eye.

Simple and straightforward. Everyone knows the terms “punch,” “jab,” and “uppercut.” Even if you don’t know the technical meaning of “back-kick,” the context makes it clear.

Which brings us to...

2 Mind your paragraph structure.

One mistake that authors often make in a scene like this is to put it all in one big paragraph. Don’t do that. The paragraphs should follow the ebb and flow of the fight. Let’s break it down.

In the first paragraph, Azra opens with a punch. The second paragraph is Desa evading that (by ducking under it) and then beginning a counterattack. In the third paragraph, when her opponent is stunned, Desa lashes out with a devastating move that hits Azra hard.

The fourth paragraph is Azra regaining her balance with the handstand and then throwing her knife. The fifth paragraph is the knife crossing the intervening space. This is optional. Do it too often, and it gets clunky. But if you do it at the right time, it creates a nice visual.

The sixth paragraph is Desa catching the knife.

Readers have been trained to associate a new paragraph with a change in topic. Starting a new paragraph resets the reader's brain and primes them to accept new information. Every time you do so, you subtly indicate that the next phase of the fight has begun.

The flip side of one giant paragraph is switching paragraphs all the time. This doesn't work either.

Azra threw a punch.

Desa ducked and felt a whoosh of air over her head.

She sent a pair of jabs into Azra's chest...

Things stand out to us by contrast. If everything stands out, then nothing stands out.

3 Avoid pronoun confusion.

Sometimes it's obvious. "Azra stepped forward. Desa punched her in the face." It's pretty clear that Desa didn't punch herself in the face. But sometimes it's not so obvious. Here are a few good phrases for when two characters who both use the same pronoun are fighting.

"The other woman/man." "Enemy/opponent/adversary/foe." You may want to invent a euphemism for the rival character. For example.

"Grabbing two handfuls of Slade's shirt, Jack shoved the evil bastard into the wall." This way, you're not overusing descriptors like "opponent."

All of this only applies to third-person narratives. First-person narratives avoid this issue entirely. But you're limited to a single point of view character. So, choose wisely.

4 Expand your vocabulary and keep a thesaurus nearby.

That's good advice for any author, but it's very useful when you're penning fight scenes. "Punch, jab, right-hook." "Knife, blade, steel." If you want fight scenes that are easy to visualize, you will often have to describe the same object several times in quick succession. Let's revisit the earlier scene.

Her arm was a blur as she drew a knife from her belt and threw it.

Glittering steel tumbled through the air.

Leaning back, Desa brought both hands up to catch the knife between clapped palms. The tip of the blade hung an inch away from her eye.

Four sentences in a row that focus on the knife. Repeating words isn't a problem if it feels natural, but you want a vast arsenal of synonyms at your disposal to keep your prose smooth. Notice how I say, "Glittering steel tumbled through the air," instead of, "The knife tumbled through the air?"

Also, "Her arm was a blur." In my first draft of this scene, that sentence was "Her hand was a blur." I changed it because, in the next paragraph, I mention Desa's hands as she catches the knife.

Yes, that is the level of painstaking care that goes into every scene.

5 Balance Speed and Clarity

Unfortunately, the two key components of a good action scene are often in opposition. One comes at the expense of the other. Speed requires short, declarative sentences. Clarity sometimes demands lots of detail. You navigate this tension by following the rules that I have laid out for you above.

There is no simple formula for how to find a happy medium between speed and clarity. You'll have to experiment. Trial and error is part of the learning process. If the finished product isn't perfect, don't feel bad. It will never be perfect, but you will get better with practice. What's important is that you remember these two principles when you sit down to write an action scene. Strive for speed and clarity, and when those two things come into conflict, look for a balance.

And there you have it: sixteen years of writing action scenes condensed into two blog posts. I hope you found this helpful, but one way or another, let's give a shout out to Kriti and thank her for her amazing blog.

Thank you for reading.

Part 1 posted on [Armed with A Book \(February 19, 2020\)](#).

Part 2 posted on [Armed with A Book \(February 20, 2020\)](#).

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