

Time: Duration

Excerpt from *The Mechanics of Fiction Writing*
(Forthcoming)

P.E. Rowe

Once upon a time, Rowe sat down to write a new kind of skills-based guide to writing fiction, working day and night for many months before finally, it was complete. A masterful work of form, function, and style! Brilliant. After numerous consultations with fellow writers, reviewers, mentors, and influential teachers in the field, and after composing and sending a slew of book proposals to major publishers, Rowe was certain *The Mechanics of Fiction Writing* was on the path to literary glory. Rowe waited.

Four years later, after exhausting every lead and having every figurative door slammed in the literal author's figurative face, the book still goes sadly unnoticed by a cruel world ignorant to the utility and excellence of the work that lies therein! For shame.

Of course not! You're reading this (thank you, btw :). Remember, I am a fiction writer, after all. But you see what I did there? I took you on a journey through time in a fictional storyworld—the one where *The Mechanics of Fiction Writing* is not already a tremendous success (can you believe it?). The two paragraphs that open this lesson span an uncertain time period that includes the entire composition of these lessons, the editing process, and a clearly delineated gap of four years subsequent to them. That's an awful long time for so few words, but language can do this. It poses both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity to be flexible about how we portray time in our storyworlds. Today we're talking about the other dimension of time a writer must wrestle with—how long to dwell in a moment; how many words to a second, minute, hour, or eon? This is **duration**, friends. How long should we stay?

Also, once upon a time, in writers' circles, there was an edict that was mindlessly repeated as though it were federal law: "Show don't tell." You've probably heard this before, and if you're the slightest bit literal-minded, your response was probably something like, "Isn't it all telling?" Yes. It is — I mean, inasmuch as one written word at a time is a closer metaphor for telling than showing. But I digress.

The "show don't tell" edict is still a bit of an axiom you'll hear these days, but not spoken quite as forcefully or often and usually with a far better understanding of the utility of "telling." These are all just metaphorical terms, though, and aren't as precise as I'd like to be. So let's get precise as to what we're really talking about — a crucial point that fiction writers quite often miss.

What does it mean to show and not tell? The other way this is often expressed (somewhat confusingly) is "scene vs. summary." What constitutes a scene and what constitutes a summary? Exactly? That's the piece that rarely gets talked about, and it's *so* important to get this right. You probably have a fuzzy idea of a scene being visual and fast flowing, and perhaps a summary as possessing a vague collection of images bound together over an unfixed but longer period of time. Reading scenes and summaries is something like that, but the key piece of information is this (I'm presenting this part separately in a bullet because it's so important):

- A text has *NO* temporality of its own. It is an object.ⁱ

Yes. A book is just a string of symbols that represent words that represent ideas. If no one picks up the book to simulate the information stored in those words, it's just an a-temporal string of characters. So what's the significance of this?

A writer needs to consider *two* timelines. There's the *imaginary* time that theoretically passes in the storyworld (i.e.: the way the story ideally unfolds as designed by the author). And there's the *actual* time that passes for the reader as they read the text (i.e.:

how long does it take your reader to read the words in each passage). The tension between these two times is the primary distinction that separates showing from telling, scene from summary.

It may seem a little confusing right now, but we'll get it nailed down. Promise.

You may recall that I began these lessons on plot by speaking about time in another context: action verbs versus linking verbs. I mentioned that action verbs were the story's play button. It's a good metaphor, but it misses something important. If you press play on a video online, it progresses at one speed – the speed of life, we'll call it. You could go to the settings and slow down the video or speed it up if you like, but let's just think of normal speed for right now – the speed of life. Our play button as writers isn't a hard play button like this; it depends on readers and the time it takes them to read the words on the page. It's a bit of a fuzzy play button.

What makes a scene, then? When the passage of time being portrayed in the storyworld roughly matches the time it takes the average reader to read it. That's what makes a scene. That's it, Rowe? Yes, friends. That's the big one. We'll talk about the vividness of detail providing objects and actions that beg to be visualized (a bit here, but especially when we talk about space). The most important distinction here is with time, though. If you want to put a scene in your book, it needs to take approximately the same amount of time to read as it would for the action to happen in the storyworld. Got it? Good.

Our fuzzy play button can do a bunch of other things too. For instance, I skipped us four years into the future in my opening, for one – a gap. We can do that too. Think of this fuzzy play button as one of your tools. We're going to look at some different ways to use it effectively. I've designed a handy little spectrum so you can see your full range of options and we'll discuss some key points of each:

(Time Stands Still)

(Time Matches Reader Experience)

(Time Skips Forward)

Pause-----Stretch-----Scene-----Summary-----Gap

Slow

Fast

Scene: We know a little about these already, but scene writing can be so important that a few more things definitely bear mentioning. Here, we're aiming at a synchronization between the time of reader's reading and the time theoretically passing in the storyworld. There are a few really helpful tools for this. The first is dialogue. Check it out:

Rowe sat down at the desk, concentrating, getting all telepathic.

"I'm talking about scenes," Rowe said.

"Scenes?" the reader answered across the great divide. "What about them?"

"Well, they're really important. If you get the timing wrong your reader's going to have a hard time simulating your scene."

"I get that, Rowe. You've been saying it all day."

"Okay, but the dialogue—"

"Yeah, okay, Rowe. I get that now too. Reading dialogue takes approximately the same amount of time as it would for the character to say it."

"That's my point. It's very immersive."

"Yeah, you're right," the reader said. "But you were saying something earlier about action verbs?"

"You want to know about those too?" Rowe said.

"Yes, please. We get the point with the dialogue already."

Sure. In addition to dialogue, quick declarative sentences that convey action are a good way to match these two times up as well. Did you notice that I started my dialogue with a quick declarative sentence: "Rowe sat down at the desk..."? That's

what I'm talking about here. Actions are not only great fodder for a reader to simulate:

- Frankie swung his foot at the bouncing ball, missed, and went spinning onto his back.
- The angry bull leapt over the fence.
- Rachel's car went flying down the hill toward Sensibaugh Avenue.

They also match up quite well with an average reader's reading time. When you're writing a scene, it's worth considering how much description you're using to direct the reader's simulation. There's usually no need to over-direct. Remember that a reader is a lot like you and that the telepathy game is cooperative. Just like you do when you read, your reader will fill in some gaps here. A good example of this might be the sentence about the bull jumping over the fence above. I don't have to mention that there's ground on either side of the fence for a reader to visualize it, right? They'll just put it there. They might even put in a "thump" when the bull lands on the other side. And readers probably assume the fence isn't a police barricade in Times Square, right? So, there's no need to bog down an otherwise smoothly flowing scene with too many needless details. If an important object is introduced in a scene, try to be quick about it (or mindful that you're pushing the pause button). No need to know that the fence is made of 1.5-inch round, hollow, steel-alloy runners joined at the posts with galvanized titanium U-joints. Sure, you can visualize that, but if you push it and don't get back to the action, your scene is going to stall. Bull. Fence. Got it. Good. The writer reader relationship is one of trust. Scenes are a great place to trust readers. But, you may *want* to slow down a scene for effect. That's a whole other technique.

Stretch: We should go back to the metaphor of the video player for this concept. Stretching a scene is like playing a scene

in slow motion. You might choose to use this technique for dramatic effect at a critical moment in a story.

Check this out: the following passage is from the story “Labor Day Dinner” by Canadian short story maestra Alice Munro. At this precise moment in the story, a family is on their way home following a dinner marked by the kind of squabbling that often happens when an extended family gets together. Those arguments probably seemed meaningful at the time. Then this happens:

Along the second crossroad, from the west, a dark-green 1969 Dodge is travelling at between eighty and ninety miles an hour. Two young men are returning from a party to their home in Logan. One has passed out. The other is driving. He hasn't remembered to put the lights on. He sees the road by the light of the moon.

There isn't time to say a word. Roberta doesn't scream. George doesn't touch the brake. The big car flashes before them, a huge, dark flash, without lights, seemingly without sound. It comes out of the dark corn and fills the air right in front of them the way a big flat fish will glide into view suddenly in an aquarium tank. It seems to be no more than a yard in front of their headlights. Then it's gone—it has disappeared into the corn on the other side of the road.ⁱⁱ

Alice, I am not worthy. In Rowe's humble opinion this is *stunning* writing—absolutely sublime. You've probably already taken in what I love about it based on the topic and the context. Alice is managing time here like a virtuoso, moving the story along at a sharp clip to that inevitable moment when the cars seem destined to collide. She's also giving you something very specific to visualize: “a dark-green 1969 Dodge travelling at between eighty and ninety miles an hour.” And then it happens, and she cues you to know exactly how long it takes: “There isn't time to say a word.” Yet the text cues a lot in that briefest of moments—that George doesn't touch the brake; that Roberta

doesn't scream. Reading these two sentences has already taken us past real-world time at the speed of life. But our narrator continues anyway. There's a sixty-word description of the moment for you to linger on and visualize—the flash of the car, where it came from, that it glides like a big flat fish into view, that it passes no more than a yard in front of them. Then, just as the passage seems to move from stretch to pause...Poof! "Then it's gone—" Three words that bring an end to the stretching of time, and the suspense is released. And don't you just feel like you've simulated a moment when life slows down and stretches out—a lot like people experience when they have a near-death experience? This is a masterful management of duration. A sentence more would have lingered too much. A sentence less and it's not quite right. Perfect, Alice. Telepathy at its finest. Somebody really should give you an award or something.

Pause: One of the things about the "Show don't tell" axiom that can be confusing is that often there isn't a hard boundary between when you're in a scene, a stretch, a pause, or a summary. Alice's summary leading up to the near-collision is very scene-like, partly because she's brought the reader to that point using language that cues scene—objects to visualize and progressive action verbs "is traveling," "returning," and "driving." It cues the reader to put that car in motion. Is it summary or a scene of its own? Tough to tell.

It's not quite an exact science here with pause either. Even a pause can contain many visual cues, especially a description of a space or object: remember Stephen's rabbit? That rabbit on the table was just begging to be visualized. But it wasn't really moving. We were still essentially dealing with a pause. We'll cover some ways to create excellent vivid cues for visualization when we talk about space, but for now, let's stick with duration.

Functionally, a pause can be great for presenting the state of the storyworld to a reader—especially at the start of a story. If we return to the first paragraph of the Ju-Bee banana story, you'll get

a good example of how you can convey a chunk of vital information relatively quickly. (You may also want to consider what it feels like for Rowe to juxtapose this silly banana story with the climax of a Nobel Prize winner's actual short story)

Ju-Bee was starving. It had been over four days since he'd eaten a thing, and all the other chimps, who were full, had been harassing him non-stop. He was seated at the base of the banana tree, looking up at the fruit hanging there as though it were taunting him. Mace and Ug-o were the two who had actually hurt his ankle, hobbling him so severely that he couldn't get up on two legs, though Ju-Bee knew he could get up the tree if Mace weren't around.

Note the linking and a-temporal verbs: *was starving, had been, were full, had been, was seated, knew*. You're getting the state of things—Ju-Bee's state of being. And you're getting it fast. A pause, almost counterintuitively, can draw a reader into the situation fast, before the writer presses play. I've presented a few important things to visualize here too: a seated chimp beneath a banana tree and some bananas, and maybe even the two other chimps if the reader wants to place them out of context. So it's not that this paragraph isn't "showing" to some degree. But it's mostly "telling" the reader about the state of the storyworld. You're definitely going to find pauses useful, both for setting a scene as I've done here, or for describing place details and objects in your storyworld. Never be afraid to pause to a purpose, as long as you're mindful of what the passage is cueing for the reader trying to simulate it. Lots of visual cues in a description of setting might offer a pleasant respite from continuing action—especially if they're well-drawn cues; fourteen pages describing the difference between your character's front and rear suspension in his rally car might just turn your book into a doorstep before the all-important scene—the race!

Summary: The easiest way to characterize summary is as a section of text that takes less time for a reader to read than it

would for the events to unfold in the storyworld. For reasons mentioned above, there isn't a particularly hard boundary here — especially when summaries offer particularly visual cues within them. To wit:

George went into the room cautiously optimistic.

Over the course of the ten-minute appointment, the doctor told George that his cancer was progressing. The old oncologist often paused to grimace and shake his head while staring down into the chart instead of looking George in the eyes. George took this as a bad sign and spent most of the time trying to figure out how many cotton balls were in that little jar on the counter, and then how many he could possibly swallow if he had a glass of water to help wash them down. It was not a productive appointment.

He left the room dejected, trying to figure out how to break the news to his sons with minimal disruption to their lives.

It certainly doesn't take ten minutes to read this passage, so we're definitely in summary territory. This passage certainly has scene-like elements, though. I've deliberately given you cues to visualize that blur the lines—the doctor's grimacing and head shaking, the cotton balls on the counter, a glass of water. But in terms of what this story is probably about, the time's been crunched down to convey the important information in the appointment: that the cancer has progressed and that the doctor didn't convey a posture of optimism.

This is the primary purpose of a summary. It usually condenses actions for sake of brevity and provides necessary information that can't be left to the reader to fill in. What George learned in that appointment is probably going to be vital to the plot of that story, but a ten-minute scene, or even a two-minute scene, may not be justified.

The duration of summaries, of course, can vary widely:

Veronica was packed in an hour. It took her just over five hours to drive from Providence to Ithaca, but she was flying

the entire way, scanning the horizon for cops with a dagger focus and keeping her high-beams on the entire time.

Here, essentially, there are two time periods crunched down into these two sentences for a total of six hours. You can do the same thing with one sentence and an era: The Peloponnesian war plunged the Greek city-states into a state of chaos for nearly twenty-eight years.

Gaps: Lastly, we have gaps. Sometimes gaps will be clear-cut and usually announced by an adverbial phrase that specifies time:

The following day, Greg got fired for failing to show for work.

But other times, there won't be such a clearly delineated gap in time. Sometimes, for stylistic reasons, a writer might leave the length of the gap a mystery for the reader to solve. One chapter the character is a clean-cut banker working nine-to-five, and the next he's sporting a mountain-man beard, shaggy clothes, and walking in the wilderness at an unknown time.

A few other tools that create unspecified gaps are ends of chapters, white space, and breaks between sections (Book I vs. Book II). A writer might leave the events in these gaps mysterious as well to generate some suspense as the story picks up again.

So those are the tools of duration. How will you use them? That, my friend, is entirely up to you, but now that you know roughly how they work, hopefully that question will be a lot easier for you to decide. I'll mention that it's not a terrible idea to look to generate scenes at the important points in the story – to linger here and dramatize the moments that most impact the story you're trying to tell. But this too is not an exact science. Take Alice's story "Labor Day Dinner," for instance. All the conflict between the characters takes place before the near-collision. The story is filled with dialogue that ostensibly should be very immersive, yet the only part of that story I remember is the

summary before the near-crash and the pause that lingers on the moment the green Dodge is hanging out there in space illuminated by the family's headlights.

The important point is having a finger on that button—knowing that duration is a key component in how your reader processes the story in their mind. I've found that the best tool for feeling out whether a scene is too long or too short or flowing at the right tempo is to read it. How long did it take you to get through it? Does it feel like the story is progressing at the speed of life? Great. You've got yourself a scene (probably through savvy use of dialogue; sharp, action-packed sentences; and incisive visual cues). If it's too slow, cut a few sentences down and read it again. Repeat until the tempo feels right. Sometimes, that's the best we can do. There will still always be an art to this endeavor that separates the Alices from the rest of us. But now that we know the tools of the trade, we know what you're up to, Alice, and...we're still mightily impressed. Well, at least Rowe is anyway, and a few random folks in Sweden...or is it Norway? Maybe one of you readers will find out one day and can tell me for sure. Make sure you drop me a line if you do.

Exercise: Scene and Summary – Duration in Practice

As we've discussed, the terms "scene" and "summary" refer to different places on the continuum that describes the relationship between the passing of storyworld time and time in the real world at the speed of life.

Things like dialogue and concise description of action tend to fall into the realm of scene, because the time it takes for the reader to read the passage roughly matches the representation of the time elapsing in the storyworld. Likewise, the story seems to stop or take a "pause" when the narrator offers a long description of a setting, character traits, or objects in the storyworld. Both summary and gaps compress time by offering few words to narrate the passing of substantial amounts of time – sometimes days, weeks, months or years in as little as a sentence or two.

Great writers can flip between these depictions of time in the storyworld effortlessly, and they always do it to a purpose.

Your challenge in this exercise is to compose a piece of a story that needs to make use of several of these different portrayals of time in the storyworld. Use no more than three pages, but in that space, shift the portrayal of time *AT LEAST* three times.

When you think you're done, you're not done just yet. Make sure you've revised, proofread, revised, etc., until you're satisfied. Then, copy your draft and paste a second in another document. On the second copy *only*, do the following:

1. Leave bits of scene as written with no alteration to the text.
2. If you use a pause (straight description) of more than two sentences, *italicize it*.
3. Highlight the parts you summarize in **bold**.
4. If you use a stretch (where the story slows – think slow motion in sports), underline it.
5. Finally, indicate a gap specifically in [brackets], with the time that passes in the storyworld explicitly stated, like so: [gap – 45 minutes passes].

Remember that these categories are *subjective guidelines*, so it won't always be perfectly clear whether something is scene,

stretch, or summary. WRITE FIRST! without any specific category in mind while you're writing, then go back and do your best to categorize when you're done.

Feel free to use the type of narrator you think will best suit your story.

I'm including a draft of this exercise for you to use as an example if it's helpful. It follows on from my example in a previous exercise "Bring on the Bear" with my protagonist Candace as narrator. The goal here is to shift between differing durations as smoothly as possible, and the alteration of the typeface is to help you to visualize how often and how smoothly you're doing it when you do:

It was several hours before anyone heard anything useful from the airline. People were gathering around the hanging flat-screens and looking up at the news with a kind of weird reverent awe on their faces. They looked oddly like worshipers to my eyes. It seemed ugly in a salacious kind of way—like how you feel compelled to look at a car crash whether you want to or not. I walked away, sat on the floor in the corner of the gate where my connecting flight was scheduled to depart. I dozed off. [Gap—two hours pass]

When I woke up, every flight on the board had been canceled and the terminal had almost cleared out. I walked along the tile causeway past Dunkin Donuts, Starbucks, and The Coffee Company—all within what seemed like a hundred feet—but it must have been further. Finally, I saw someone who looked like they might know what was going on—a gate agent.

"Everything's canceled?" I said.

"Till at least tomorrow afternoon," she said, nodding with her best feigned apologetic look. "And it'll probably take a while to get everyone who's booked back out after that. Did you hear the news?"

It took me a moment to realize what she'd meant. I nodded. "I fell asleep at the gate before they canceled everything. I guess it must be really bad in LA."

She nodded. "Bad as it gets."

"We're safe, though," I said, almost as if it were an affirmation. I realized it was a weird thing to say, and the gate agent looked at me funny and smiled before passing on.

I walked until I came to the security doors and stood there for a moment considering whether I should go out, and then I came to my senses and realized that I was wasting my time lingering in the airport. Then Imogen called.

Jesus could she be needy. She kept repeating that Dad was dying, and then she'd bawl in my ear and beg me to get there – get there! like there was anything anyone could do about me being fifteen-hundred miles away with every airplane in the country grounded. Of course, she couldn't do this without me. On the way to get my bags, I almost walked into two of the few remaining people. I didn't know what to tell her, so I told her I was getting hungry and skulked off to find my suitcase. [Gap – 20 minutes pass]

Twenty minutes later, I was still thinking about Imogen, dragging my suitcase behind me as it clicked to mark the distance between the tiles. Tick, tick, tick, and **all I could think of was my poor, sad, crying little sister, with my right half thinking that eventually she'd need to find a way to be a useful person in the hardest times and my left half pitying her and doubting that she ever would. I turned and walked back toward baggage claim to see if I could find a rental car counter. I could do it in a day. I thought I could.** [Gap – 5 minutes pass]

I wasn't the only one. The only two counters with agents had lines that looked at least five people deep – I was too tired to count – the other three companies had paper signs up that read, "No Cars."

"What a joke," I said, mostly to myself. "Can't they drive a few people to next closest branch?"

"That'd be smart," the last guy in line said. "Don't hold your breath waiting for smart in this world." He smiled at me, and I think I returned the smile as I crossed my arms and settled into line behind him.

We started chatting. He had a good sense of humor. I was too tired to remember a word he said to me in that first ten minutes we were waiting in line, but I know we were laughing despite the tragedy – or tragedies, in my case – and that was the weird thing, I guess. People were oddly calm – a serene yet nervous calm. I couldn't help but think that it was because they

were grateful they'd flown into Boston instead of Los Angeles, and maybe they were. Who wouldn't be?

This guy Anthony was nice. I guess that's what I thought about him – he was nice. He had an earring that I kept staring at. It looked classy because he looked classy. His dress shirt was wrinkled but still tucked in, and he was hunching a bit, with his hands in his pockets. His eyes looked to be weary, but still bright in an optimistic way. And he had a good smile. In ten minutes, I trusted him. The thought wouldn't even have crossed my mind if I hadn't known it would be safe. I didn't for a second stop to think if he thought the same of me. [Gap – 40 minutes pass]

Forty minutes later, we were heading west on the Mass Turnpike in a grey Honda Civic with New Jersey plates. Anthony offered to drive all the way to Rochester where he lived with his wife and two sons. He told me I should sleep as much as I could because it was still another fifteen hours from there to St. Paul. But I couldn't sleep, and I didn't sleep, and I wouldn't sleep. He started telling me about his mother, who'd had a stroke five years earlier and made a full recovery. I wondered what JW would be like ten years on, when he was Anthony's age – what kind of father he would be? What would he be to me when that day came?

ⁱ Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, pp. 87-88, 1980.

ⁱⁱ Munro, Alice. "Labor Day Dinner." *The New Yorker*, p. 47, September 28, 1981.