

Writing vehicles - How to Move the Story Forward

One of the universal principles of good fiction writing is the need to move the story forward. If you don't move the story forward, then the story can't evolve. A story that doesn't go anywhere or do anything isn't a story.

Every story depends on the development of the main plot and the characters, as well as themes and subplots. A good story cannot exist without these elements.

There are numerous ways to move things along, for instance, dialogue, characterisation, description, exposition, plenty of conflict and transitional scenes.

Dialogue

Dialogue is present tense and active, so it's a good way to move the story forward. It works because it's selective. In other words, it should only divulge information that is necessary.

That means characters interact with each other and impart necessary information that relates to the plot and what might happen. You can also use dialogue to exchange clues and hints and to foreshadow events.

Description

Writers don't always think of description as something that can move the story along. But it does, because it imparts necessary information for the reader and keeps the momentum going. Writers do this by describing certain details – they may use direct information, or they may use hints for things that are yet to take place later in the story. Giving out this information to the reader helps the story move forward, and with action scenes or fast paced scenes, this momentum is increased.

Exposition

Narrative or direct exposition – unlike the indirect exposition known as 'Show don't tell' – is used by writers to quickly move things along without overpowering the rest of the story. Simple narrative helps to give certain snippets of information that doesn't need huge blocks of description, for example:

'The group disbanded in 1944, though Peter knew pockets of partisans still existed'.

This imparts enough information for the reader and doesn't need large chunks of backstory or explanation. It's exposition that moves things along within a scene. This is how effective narrative works – interspersed with description and dialogue and in small amounts.

Transitional Scenes

Transitional scenes allow forward movement of time like the wave of a magic wand. Without them, the story would stutter, become bogged down and may deviate from the main plot.

These kinds of scenes allow the writer to forgo the boring stuff that characters might otherwise undertake, and instead it gets to the next scene as quickly as possible. This allows time to move forward from one point to another and therefore so does the story.

Characterisation

Character motivations are often revealed through dialogue. People let slip what they really think and feel when they are talking – the ‘real’ person behind the persona comes through. What your characters really want and how they’re going to get it provides a catalyst and so moves the story forward. Character motivations drive the action, which in turn drives the story.

Conflict

Conflict is known as the backbone of any story, but it also drives the story because the types of conflict you create act like fuel in an engine – it provides power and thrust. Readers need to see the hero fight his way out of all sorts of trouble. Often this leads to action scenes, which always propel things forward. Your readers need to see how such conflicts are resolved. And of course, they’ll be desperate to know if the good guy wins over the bad guy by the end of the story.

Other Added Elements

There are other elements you can use to help with pushing your story toward to its conclusion, ones that writers don’t generally think of, but are still worth a look at. Plot twists are something that the reader will not expect – so a turning point or major revelation should leave the reader wondering what will happen next. You should reveal information in your scenes to keep the reader engaged – elements of the plot, pieces of a jigsaw that your reader will be mentally trying to solve. These types of information revelation push the story forward.

Pacing is another useful tool. Vary the action and drama scenes with slower, reflective scenes where the characters, through their thoughts and actions and dialogue, can once again impart necessary information and move things along for the reader. Of course, the more active scenes move things along more quickly.

Each scene you write must advance story in some way. The use of dialogue, description, narrative, character motivation, transitional scenes, conflicts, building and solving problems within the plot, revealing characters and above all, revealing necessary information, all work together to move the story forward.

All these elements must have momentum. If they don’t then the whole story may stagnate and not actually go anywhere, and the story won’t reach its conclusion. Therefore, we talk about the importance of ‘moving things forward’.

Write a short story and then make some comments afterwards, on what ‘vehicles’ you used to drive your story forward and how successful or not, you found them to be.