

Frank's Writing Tips and Bachelor Cookbook: Flow

If you've ever been part of a critique circle, you'll notice pretty quickly that there are an awful lot of words that get bandied back and forth by everyone present. Key words, perhaps, or maybe a better term is talking points. They're used a lot in the beginnings of a circle, amongst people who don't really know each other, and as such when giving critiques they aren't aware of what's a stylistic choice and what's not, and so by necessity they focus on general things. One that comes up perhaps more often than others, though, is this thing called 'flow'. I'll note that this is usually brought up in the context of 'this story doesn't flow', or 'you need to work on better flow', or similar such marginally inane statements.

I say inane because, as with most things in writing, the meaning of that statement is not completely obvious to the uninitiated. It's really not to the initiated either, but we don't like to admit that. But in truth, I'm sure the first time we all have received this particular comment in a critique (and we all have, I can almost guarantee it), the first thought that popped into our minds upon reception was, "Ah, okay. And how, praytell, do I fix that?"

Well, maybe it wasn't in those exact words, but you get the gist.

Now, unlike with 'show, don't tell' (the subject of my previous article), this one is not exactly conducive to reductionism or rules of thumb, because it unfortunately involves almost every aspect of the piece you're writing. But I can give a general meaning, and that meaning is pretty much what you think it is given the choice of word used to describe this concept: flow is flow. Running water, wind, lava, coronal mass ejections: whatever metaphor your mind wants to jump to first is probably an appropriate one.

Now, personally I like to think of it more in terms of music, because that's less abstract a connection to writing (lyrical music is, after all, poetry). What is it that makes a good song? Well, clearly that's a matter of opinion, but I can tell you that there's at least one thing central to any good song, no matter the genre: it has to have a regular rhythm to it, and it has to have logical chord progressions (logical being a relative term: see below). You can't write a song that just jumps around at pure random between notes, because then it will cease to be called a 'song' and will begin to be called a 'cacophony'. Flip open the nearest piano and start banging around on the keys with your face and you'll understand the difference.

There was this pop song that came out a while back, by one Willow Smith, female progeny of actor Will Smith. She made this song (some people call it a song) about a certain action involving her hair, that you may or may not have heard of. If you've never listened to it, that's perfectly all right, because there really isn't that much to hear. I'm sure some people enjoyed it for whatever reason (basic statistics: outliers always exist in a sample of sufficient size), but in general it caused a great deal more pain than pleasure amongst its listeners. So, what was the problem with it, do you suppose? Well, it may prove somewhat illuminating if I go ahead and explicitly write out the first several bars of the song. Here they go:

I whip my hair back and forth.

I whip my hair back and forth.
I whip my hair back and forth.
I whip my hair back and forth.
I whip my hair back and forth.
I whip my hair back and forth.
I whip my hair back and forth.
I whip my hair back and forth.

Okay. So, let's examine this in the context of the topic of this article. Go back and read those lines again, and ask yourself this: does that flow?

I'm guessing that question made you laugh. Even if it didn't, the immediate response you probably had to it was, "No." Or if you're overly uncertain and fair-minded, at the very least it was "Not really". If you listen to the song, you get the impact even a little stronger, because you find that not only do the lyrics not flow, but the music in this section doesn't either. It actually sounds a lot like a World War II era air raid siren, at least to my ear.

This brings up an important point. Something you should always check for in your writing is redundancy and/or repetition. Use of the same word more than once in close proximity, common use of the same sentence structure, constantly beginning paragraphs with the same definite article, whatever. Getting rid of redundancy is probably the most fundamental way to improve a piece's 'flow'.

But as I've already indicated, there's a lot more to it than that. The next time you're reading a story or a book, if you come to a part of it — a line of dialogue, an action taken by a character, a descriptive paragraph, anything — that gives you pause, stop for a second and think about why it gave you pause. The whole act of you pausing means that this particular piece did not 'flow' correctly to your ear. Here's an example I see a whole lot of when it comes to bad flow.

John's hand slapped the alarm clock, killing the wretched sound. His eyes didn't want to open, but he was always the type who, once he was up, he was up, and there was no changing that, and so he rose from his pillow and tried to rub the exhaustion from his face with the palms of his hands. John was a businessman, with brown hair and brown eyes.

This is only a mildly exaggerated example of some of the stuff I've seen time and time again in amateur writing, and I feel like I ought to coin a new term for it. Maybe 'narrative whiplash'? I don't know. But the idea should be clear in that example: that last sentence feels like it comes right the hell out of nowhere, and it quite literally stops the story for a second from progressing. I'm going to refrain from stating the obvious regarding how this relates to the topic at hand. If you want the most flawless example of bad flow I've ever come across, go pick up a copy of the book *Eragon* and read the opening paragraphs. I won't reproduce them here for fear of copyright infringement, but I highly recommend you do this, because the 19-year-old

Christopher Paolini who wrote that book was an absolute master when it came to bad flow.

These are just a few concrete examples, though. To be perfectly honest, when someone tells you your writing ‘doesn’t flow’, chances are they are actually not referring to anything particularly concrete, like places where the narrative stops to do a description dump or anything like that. I used the music example because music, maybe moreso than other media, is most judged by personal taste. When you hear a song and you like it, it’s not at all easy to articulate what it is you like about the song. You can say things like ‘it has a catchy beat’, or ‘the lyrics are really insightful’, or whatever, but probably those things don’t quite explore the whole range of what it is that makes you like the song. There’s just something about it that drags you along and makes you feel good. And so this is the thing that most people will be talking about when they talk about flow.

And that actually sucks pretty hard, if you think about it, because in many ways that’s an unsolvable problem. You get right into the whole ‘you can’t please everybody’ camp, and Jason Voorhees tends to haunt that camp, so you should probably stay away from it. But unfortunately you can’t.

So what do you do? Well, there are some tricks, I guess. Reading your work aloud tends to help a lot, because by reading it you can actually physically hear the rhythm of the words, and that’s an important aspect. You can bust out the thesaurus if you feel like you’re overusing a certain word (or words). You can count the word-lengths of your paragraphs and try splitting some up or combining some just to add a little variety. In general, though, it will never be perfect. At least, the writing itself won’t ever be perfect. And this is okay.

But as I’ve indicated, ‘flow’ doesn’t always have to be specific to the writing itself. Plot, character development, progression of events; to paraphrase *Dune*, these things must also flow.

Okay. I am now going to do something that will probably make everyone reading this turn away in horror and disgust. I am going to compare writing to mathematics.

Writing a story or an essay or an article or anything is a lot like doing a mathematical proof, you see. Math is the ultimate in logical progression of events. Math is the most elegant and precise way to show this progression from beginning to end to reach a perfectly acceptable conclusion (in math’s case, the *only* conclusion). In math, this conclusion, if the author made no mistakes, cannot be argued with by any known means. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if your writing could accomplish this?

And I don’t just mean scientific writing, because scientific writing, in that sense, is extremely similar to doing mathematics. But fiction can benefit from these ideas as well. The keyword here is ‘logic’. Does what you are doing make sense? Does the next thing logically follow from the previous thing? Are there any weak spots in your narrative, any places where you have to just shove a coincidence in there, where you have to make someone act out of character, anything like that? Do you ever have to pull a J.R.R Tolkien and insert a long paragraph right in the middle of

the story explaining in detail why, while you realize it's rather silly to be doing it this way, you needed to have the ring slip out of Frodo's pocket in the pub and somehow conveniently fall right onto his outstretched finger, despite how unlikely it is that this would happen in such a way? (No, but seriously, I love Mr. Tolkien and everything he's ever written, including *Mr. Bliss*.) Wouldn't you like to fix those things?

Okay. Here's the part where I backtrack and start talking about 'art' again. Now, there are certain stories that, on the surface at least, don't flow very well but are still loved greatly as great pieces of literature. Stream of consciousness things, like what good ol' Bill Faulkner used to write, or weird borderline nonsensical pieces like *Ulysses*, or every story published by *The New Yorker* in recent memory. These pieces obviously have their audience and are greatly loved by many. Or at least a few, in the case of the *New Yorker* stories.

So what makes them work, exactly? I may be the wrong person to ask, but I can hazard a guess. Once again, it involves logic, but this time it's a different logic. The logic of the universe that exists only within the work in question. A story can break all the rules, but as long as it breaks them in a consistent way and doesn't just feel like the author is making garbage up wholesale out of convenience, it will still work.

This is art. This is allowed. But as I said, you must be consistent.

And in that way, the idea of 'flow' being entirely based on likes and dislikes can be transformed into something manageable: expectations. You can think of it like this: when you begin reading a story, your first impression will set up a whole laundry list of expectations about how the rest of the work will progress. If the author occasionally breaks those expectations, that's often quite fine, and can actually be quite exciting and clever. But if the author breaks those expectations too many times and in too inconsistent a way, you begin to sour on the piece. You want there to be logic and consistency. If that is not upheld, it's grating, irritating, and frustrating. And that's when, if you're reading this thing as part of a critique circle, you bust out that old cliché and tell the author of the story that 'it doesn't flow'.

Hey, what do you know. I managed a little reductionism after all.

Recipe #4: Frank's Pseudo-Chinese Vegetarian Stir-Fry

Preparation time, 20 or 30 minutes, depending on how long it takes you to cut vegetables.

Ingredients:

Stir-fry type vegetables (things like bell peppers, carrots, broccoli, celery, daikon root, water chestnuts, rutabaga, galangal, mung beans, kohlrabi, paw paws, deep-fried breaded squash blossoms, or whatever the hell else you want to use)

Some rice (jasmine maybe works best, basmati second best)

~1/2 cup chicken broth

1 touch of ginger

1 tablespoon-ish of brown sugar

1/2 teaspoon or so of salt
1 dash of soy sauce
1 tablespoon of oil (seriously: only use about a tablespoon)
1 very minute amount of cloves, if you're feeling adventurous

Chop up the vegetables, with a knife. Use decently-sized chunks (come on, haven't you ever eaten Chinese take-out before?). Heat the oil in a pan, HIGH HEAT (the oil must start steaming before you cook), and get the water for the rice boiling. Stir-fry the vegetables for a bit; start with the flavor vegetables (things like onions, leeks, garlic, etc.), then add one veggie at a time, starting with the tough veggies (carrots, broccoli, brussel sprouts) and proceeding in an orderly fashion by time it takes to cook each additional veggie (end with, for example, mushrooms, which should turn weak and floppy in about twenty seconds). Do not let them get completely flaccid, so stir frequently and only let things cook for a maybe twenty seconds at a time, max. At some point you should dump the rice in the boiling water, too (if you want to wash it first, go right ahead, but I can tell you from experience it's not particularly necessary unless you're trying to impress guests). Once you're happy with the consistency, turn the heat down to medium and pour in the chicken broth. Add the ginger, brown sugar, salt, soy sauce, and cloves (if you want, and if you do, seriously, do not overdo it) and stir until it all dissolves nicely. Then let that sucker slow boil for a few minutes. If most of the broth boils off, that's okay. You want that.

When you're satisfied, dump the rice on a plate, dump the veggies next to it, and pour the remaining broth mixture over the veggies. Enjoy. Or not. It's up to you, really.

If you want it spicy, I recommend Sriracha, or else just add those hard red Chinese peppers to the mix while you're cooking it. You can also add meat, you anti-environment, pro-animal-torture heathen of a savage barbarian. (I recommend chicken or pork, but cook it a little more slowly or tenderize it with something first, because stir-fried meat has a tendency to get rock hard.)