

128 Chapter 3: Riding the Orange Line

Experiment with *pause*. Interrupt your scene with information about violence against women—statistics, relation between such violence and alcohol abuse, psychological profiles, and so on. Or go back to your character's girlhood nosebleeds, an identical white sink and the flow that could not seem to stop. Or try something self-reflexive, like:

How do I know her, this woman, who endures the force of her husband's fist not once but many times before ending up in a shelter, a small blondheaded deaf girl in her lap? You may think I don't know her at all, and of course you will be right. I have made her up, yes, but I can never know her, just as I will never know the force of a man's fist. That's what she said too, before she married him. Never, never, never, is what she said before she married him. I shouldn't even be writing this. I cannot possibly know.

Story Development.

Write a story, or prose narrative, in which you deliberately use all five dimensions of temporal duration.

Write them down on separate slips of paper: *summary*, *scene*, *gap*, *stretch*, *pause*. Fifteen slips of papers. Three times each. Scramble the slips of paper in a box, or hat, or envelope, draw ten out at random, arrange them before you (*scene*, *summary*, *summary*, *gap*, *stretch*, *summary*, *scene*, *pause*, *stretch*, *scene*) and write.

Repeat as necessary until you have a story.

(K.H.)

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Telling Time 3: Duration

Use to Write:	Short Fiction; Longer Fiction; (narrative in) Autobiography; (narrative in) Creative Nonfiction
Ideas and Concepts to Explore:	duration; pause; scene; "real time" vs. "narrative time"; <i>petite madeleine</i> ; stretch; summary.
Authors/Works Mentioned:	Raymond Carver, "Popular Mechanics"; Marcel Proust, <i>Remembrance of Things Past</i> .

In yet another twist on time (see "Telling Time 1" and "Telling Time 2"), narrative events extend over two kinds of "time"—1) the amount of time they would actually take to occur in "real" life, and 2) the amount of time they take for the reader to read. This hypothetical relation between "real" and "narrative" time is known, in narratology, as *duration*. Duration has five dimensions.

1. *Summary*, in which events in real time would take more time to occur than they would to read (real time > narrative time). We tend to think of summary as a bad thing, since we have learned to *show, don't tell*, and telling often takes place as summary. But of course, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with it, and most narratives depend on some degree of summary, which may collapse the events of a summer, a childhood, an evening, a life, into a sentence, a paragraph, a page, or a chapter.

You may write, for example, "During the course of my middle-school years, we moved seven times in three cities, and each time my mother assured me it would be the last." As you go on to describe the moves, or their aftermath, you will depend on summary, for no narrative will take as long to read as it takes to endure middle school.

2. *Scene*, in which events in real time would take the same amount of time to occur as to read (real time = narrative time). True scene is often characterized by dialogue, since it takes about as much time to read a line of speech as it does to say it in "real" time.

Consider Raymond Carver's short story, "Popular Mechanics," in which a husband and wife, arguing about who will get the baby in their separation, end by separating the baby. Almost all dialogue, the story completes itself in a single scene.

3. *Gap*, in which time passes in the story, but does not appear in the narration (real time > narrative time). Gap is frequently marked in contemporary fiction by white space, and can be very powerful. Some stories depend so heavily on this device (gap) that what isn't being said is more important than what is. Gap forces such narrative compression that, in it, our silence may speak louder than our words.

4. *Stretch*, in which events take more time to read about than they would to take place in reality (real time < narrative time). You are probably more familiar with this mode in film as slow motion, but it works the same in language-based narrative.

In Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, for example, there is a passage where the protagonist is eating a small cookie and falls into a pages-long reverie as he remembers such cookies from when he was a boy, their smell and taste, the tea, his mother, the light through the window, and so on. This is a famous passage, painfully familiar to French-language students, who believe themselves, working it, to be failing their translation exams. How, they wonder desperately, can it take Marcel three pages to swallow one bite of cookie? That's stretch.

5. *Pause*, in which the narrative is interrupted to go somewhere altogether different, and then returns to the exact point of rupture as if nothing else had happened at all (narrative time / narrative time \ narrative time).

Your character, for example, wakes up in bed with a stranger, sheets crumpled and with a sour, unfamiliar smell, the room gloomy from an overcast morning, but

she is still wearing her jeans and t-shirt, and her body feels bruised and sore. At that moment, the narrator recalls another incident, many years before, when your character was thrown from a sailboat in winter and awoke with the same bruised feeling. The sailboat, in winter, belonged to her brother, who used to urge her to sail with him, but since the incident, in which she almost drowned, she has not gone near water. You write about her fear. You write about her brother. You write about her struggle in the water, its steel gray color the exact color of the sky outside on this other morning years later. The man beside her wakes and asks if she wants coffee. She looks at him.

She says, "Who are you?"

Or, your narrator may leave a critical moment in a story to comment on the story itself, or the nature of fiction, or why what the reader is expecting will not happen. Or you may write parallel narratives, in which two or more stories unfold in alternating segments, each segment a pause in the other. Or you may interrupt your story with historical notes, or biographical information, or reminiscence, or meditation. The point is that you end up where you began. The narrative has paused, and then continued.

Mostly, we are not so self-conscious about duration when we write. Time tends to work itself out in narrative according to the basic logic and nature of the story. We speed things up, and we slow them down as the story seems to call for it. But sometimes it is useful to practice these effects, for, as in muscle memory, practice creates reflex and extends the range of what seems easy or "natural" to you.

For this exercise, begin with a simple event, or brief sequence of events: You come into your bedroom after school and discover that someone has been there before you, your brother probably, and one of your lizards is missing, and the other has turned from bright green to a dull, mottled brown.

Or: You're sunning yourself on the beach, a bright, scorched day, watching your four-year-old daughter build sand castles when your son runs up screaming he's got sand in his eyes, and by the time you rinse them out with fresh water from the cooler, your daughter has wandered out into the waves, where even from that distance you can tell that the next one will come crashing down over her head.

Or: Your husband, drunk again, is in a rage, and you know that if you move, he will strike.

Write your story, or small sequence of events, first as *summary*. Get the facts down, what happens and how. Do it quickly. Use compression to your advantage:

When my husband gets like that, he hits me. He works up slow to it, almost always. You know, comes home late, smelling like he does, and tries to honey me up. But the smell, and his hands, when he's like that, they get clumsy. He says something. I say something back. We do this a few times, then the next thing I know I'm in the bathroom, my nose bleeding into the sink.

Now write the same events as *scene*, filling them out, paying strict attention to detail, timing the narration to the actual logic of real time:

"Don't you come near me," I yell. I turn my face away from the smell, something like medicine but sweeter, more familiar than a recurring dream.

"Aw," he says, "honey. Aw honey."

"I mean it this time," I tell him. "You can sleep on the couch. I've had enough."

"Enough what?" he says, coming closer, backing me toward the wall

He has that look in his eyes, and though I know I should not be afraid, that there's more danger in being afraid than in just, for example, walking out. I do not walk out.

Instead, I say, "The pillows are in the hall closet," and that's when he hits me.

Now write the same events as *gap*. Here you will have to write parenthetical events that are powerfully suggestive of his rage:

In the shelter, everyone was kind, but I missed him. They kept trying to make me remember. They made me talk to counselors. They showed me pictures.

One woman (I'll call her Grace) had a little deaf girl with her. That girl was so blondheaded that when the sun hit her hair it could be blinding. She loved the sun, that little girl. She used to go from room to room in the shelter, looking for little scraps of sun in from the windows on the floor. Then she'd squat there, playing jacks. You could come up right behind her, and she wouldn't budge, nor even blink.

When that girl's mama told me that she wasn't born that way, not deaf, born instead with all her hearing, that's when, for the first time, I wanted to cry. I wanted to gather her up in my lap and cry out loud for every one of us, but there's something wrong with my eyes these days and they don't rear up right.

Take the same events, or a portion thereof, and *stretch* them out into slow motion:

It's like, you see it but you don't see it. Everything gets quiet and far away and even the words coming out of your own mouth aren't your own, it's not your voice, this isn't even your life. Because it's all in that instant when he raises his hand against you, but you don't really believe it, the drawing back of his whole arm—shit, you have seen this before, run girl run. But you don't. It goes back sure and fast, almost like pitching a baseball, but there isn't any ball in his hand. His hand is the ball, all round and white, but you're not the hitter, he is.

"I mean it," you tell him, even as the ball is floating all round and white toward the plate, which is you and you don't duck.