

## Writing Sex and Violence

*By Midnight*

### Violence, Carnage, and Mayhem...

When penning action scenes, a writer is always tasked with the age old question: How much violence is *too much*? Or can the scene suffer if there's not *enough*?

There is a world of difference in the splatter novels such as Jack Ketcham's *Off Season*, when compared to more restrained offerings like Tom Harris's *Red Dragon*, where most of the violence is implied (or at least spared graphic description). Both styles work—and both have their respective followings. It's all dependent on the story a writer is trying to tell. If you're writing a novel, screenplay, or comic script that follows the slasher horror formula, then more graphic accounts of violence are not only welcome, but *expected*.

However, even in horror, there are shades of gray. For instance, Stephen King discusses in *Danse Macabre* a scene that he had originally written for his novel, *Salem's Lot*. Though the novel features no shortage of horror, there's *not* a heavy emphasis on gore or any particularly visceral elements. However, King decided to write in a scene where a character is trapped in a cellar and attacked by rats. One rat even squirms its way into the unfortunate character's mouth as the feisty critters eat him alive. Ultimately, King's editor found the scene to be “too much,” which led to King removing the scene—much to his dismay. Upon reflection, King would later go on record saying that the editor likely made the right decision.

Now, if King was writing a novel in the vein of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, cutting out the rat scene would likely have been a mistake. What works for some stories will feel out of place for others, and vice versa.

### Violence, with style!

There are numerous ways to write a violent scene, from all-out detail, to a more subdued approach. Take, for example, this scene:

*Jack had surveyed the area an hour ago. One sentry had been stationed in the foyer, and another armed with a machine gun was watching from the roof of the building across the street. Now the*

*rooftop sentry rested atop his gun, his throat smiling wetly in the moonlight.*

The above description shows how the majority of the violence can be left “off screen,” while still be effectual.

But now, let’s look to Tom Harris and his novel, *Red Dragon*, which shows a more graphic approach:

*She forgot the stance and she forgot the front sight but she got a good two-handed grip on the pistol and as the door exploded inward she blew a rat hole through his thigh. She shot him in the face as he slid down the door and she shot him in the face as he sat on the floor and she ran to him and shot him twice in the face as he sprawled against the wall, scalp down to his chin and his hair on fire.*

It may not be the best written sequence in *Red Dragon*, but it gets the point across and does so in a more detailed tone than the previous example. Other attempts can also apply a more pulp-action feel by going for the sensory cues:

*Then he went down to the screeching man and shoved the hot muzzle of his chattergun into the man’s wide open mouth and pulled the trigger, letting the gun howl until the clip was empty and, somewhere in there, the screaming stopped.*

The scene leaves an impression without describing outright gore. Some authors tend to go for the less-is-more approach, akin to something like this example below:

*The group consisted of crooked politicians and musclemen, just as Mason had expected. The men were dining at their usual haunt, Carlo’s, a throwback era diner that looked like a holdover from the 1950s. Mason intently watched the group as they devoured their food without expressing a care in the world. He watched as they paid the attractive waitress with their weathered cash. It was blood money. By the time they arrived at their limo, Mason had already lobbed the fragmentation grenade through the air. The vehicle erupted in flames, a loud roar of twisted metal and glass masking the screams.*

There’s nothing particularly detailed about the passage above but, once again, it achieves its goal. There are nearly endless ways to construct a scene and no two writers will likely use the same methods.

It is worth noting that some writers, however, when writing a violent scene, may get hooked on

what they think is a “catchy” word or term. I’ve seen this numerous times, and here’s one example of what *not* to do:

*Trent lowered the shotgun to hip level and fired. Six rounds left. He tromboned the pump, shouldered it again and sighted his target. He fired, tromboned, fired, tromboned, fired, tromboned, fired...*

Clearly, the writer here is a fan of the trombone! But most readers won’t be impressed. Always vary your descriptions and keep things fresh. And, while we’re on the subject of keeping things fresh, excessive violence can work in certain stories, but be cautious of overkill—which can run the risk of numbing the audience to your story, characters, and other dramatic situations later on.

### *Sex Sells, but only if it’s good...*

Let’s face it, sex *does* sell. But, unless you’re writing erotica, how *much* sex should your novel, script, or comic have, and how detailed should it get? And, the larger question: is it necessary? Sure, sex is a part of life—but if you’re writing a science fiction space opera, does it *really* fit? A sex scene would be ill-placed in a *Star Wars* tale, but sexual attraction has far more prominence in the various *Star Trek* incarnations, dating back to the original 1960s television series—even if it was merely implied. At the opposite end of the science fiction spectrum, you have more overtly sexual outings like *Barbarella*, which revels in its sexiness. Or to take it to an extreme—the sci-fi/horror film *Species*, where the alien’s sexual endeavors are intrinsic to the plot. In short, it’s best for a writer to know their work enough to realize when, or *if*, such a scene or theme even fits the context of the story. As with anything, an over-abundance of sex in a story can be detrimental, unless one is writing erotica, in which case, there’s really never enough.

While we’re on the subject of erotica, there’s a reason Amazon’s profitable ebook industry (and ultimately, their various Kindle models) rose to such heights—yep, you guessed it: erotica. It was the addition of countless erotica titles that made Amazon’s current ebook industry what it is today. I’ve dabbled in writing erotica before (if there’s a request to produce a tutorial on “Writing Erotica,” that can be arranged) and it’s a very different style of writing, no less challenging than any other novel or novella—with its own set of difficulties. But for the sake of this tutorial, let’s assume that one is simply trying to work sex *into* their story, as opposed to erotica where the story *is* sex.

Much like violence, the inclusion of sex can be handled in various ways. Does one write a hot and steamy scene with no detail left out, or should the majority be left to the reader’s imagination? There’s

no right answer, but let's look at the following example from *Twilight Eyes*, written by Dean Koontz, where suggestive dialogue is used in the place of sweaty thrusting.

*Rya pulled off her sopping tennis shoes and socks, then skinned out of her wet T-shirt. Beads of water glimmered and trembled on her bare arms, shoulders, breasts.*

*"You could have been killed," I said.*

*She slipped off her shorts and panties, took another sip of brandy, and came to me.*

*"Were you hoping to get killed, for Christ's sake?"*

*"Hush," she repeated.*

*I was shuddering uncontrollably.*

*She seemed calm. If she had been afraid during the climb, the fear had left her the moment she touched ground again.*

*"What is it with you?" I asked.*

*Instead of answering, she began to undress me.*

*"Not now," I said. "This isn't the time—"*

*"It's the perfect time," she insisted.*

*"I'm not in the mood—"*

*"Perfect mood."*

*"I can't—"*

*"You can."*

*"No."*

*"Yes."*

*"No."*

*"See?"*

It's crucial to remember that the timing of a sex scene should always be logical and appropriate to the progression of the story. Characters may not have time for sex within a tale that spans a single day or less, or if hectic chases, shootouts, and the like keep them busy. Yet, a sex scene *can* fit in at unexpected junctures of a story, if established opportunity and motive is provided. Desperation in the face of almost-certain death is often employed as an excuse by many writers to include one.

In Stephen King's novel, *The Mist*, the protagonists are trapped in a supermarket while creatures dwell outside, trying to get in. Yet, two characters still make it to the back room for some alone time:

*We went up the narrow flight of stair and into the office. It was empty, as she had said. And there was a lock on the door. I turned it. In the darkness she was nothing but a shape. I put my arms out, touched her, and pulled her to me. She was trembling. We went down on the floor, first kneeling, kissing, and I cupped one firm breast and could feel the quick thudding of her heart through her sweatshirt.*

Eric Van Lustbader's novel, *The Miko*, goes a bit further, employing various sex scenes and describing them in greater detail. While Lustbader's books are sometimes criticized as being too "wordy," he does make sure that most of his sex scenes tie into the plot, even if some outstay their welcome:

*Yoki's eyes fluttered closed in pleasure and her soft breasts heaved into Sato's calloused palms as his head slid down until his mouth touched the insides of her heated thighs. A line of warm sweat trickled like a serpent's tail down the deep indentations of her spine. Her palms traced a circular pattern inward across her own spread-apart thighs until, lifting the material of her kimono, encountered bare flesh.*

*Yoki drew Sato upward, rubbing him against her until she had no other choice but to arch up and impale herself on him, thrusting her hips wildly off the futon, the breath whooshing out of her with an audible rush, the mounds of her breasts quivering with the strength of the sensations running rampant through her.*

If pure erotica is what a writer is aiming for, anything becomes fair game. But when story and character take precedent, a writer should always be wary of where and if a sex scene can enhance or detract from the momentum of the plot.