

Rhythm and Flow



Rhythm and flow in writing affect the piece's readability. A piece of writing with good rhythm and flow will be a more pleasant read than a hard slog wading through stuff that doesn't hang together well. It is part of crafting your writing as well as a reflection of your own writing style.

Rhythm is strongly related to poetry in that it concerns the shape of the word used, their emphasis, and relationships to each other. In prose we have more tools available to help with establishing rhythm in our writing. Sentence length can be used to create rhythm, and in this way can be used to establish pacing for the section of writing.

Flow concerns with how the broader structure works cohesively. One paragraph leads to the next, and one chapter flows on to the next.

A good test of these qualities in writing is to read it aloud. Can you read it smoothly, or do you stumble over the words and struggled to get the inflection of the sentences right?

Rhythm

What is rhythm in writing?

Rhythm in writing is the pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables, vowel and consonant sounds, and pacing that a writer can use when composing sentences. These choices enhance the tone and mood of a piece of writing. By carefully crafting the rhythmic flow of their prose, writers can make their words flow in a very pleasing way.

Historically, rhythm is more noticeable in poetry. That's because the meter of many poems helps draw attention to the poem's rhythm.

Rhythm helps make writing more memorable. For example, it's difficult to think of Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven" without remembering its haunting, sing-song rhythm. By making the writing in your prose more rhythmic, you can make your own literary works similarly memorable.

Rhythm in literature

The primary differences between rhythm in literature and rhythm in poetry have to do with the structures of the work. Because these types of writing don't share the same structure, rhythm in prose is more difficult to spot and is likely to be more intermittent.

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Rhythm in prose is often more intermittent than rhythm in poetry. While an entire poem may use a special rhythmic meter, prose writing is likelier to use rhythm in specific places (in any given literature example, special meter is likelier to be found at either the very beginning or very end of the text).

Because there are no fixed lines in prose, writers usually use special rhythm when they want to make certain moments and characters stand out. In this way, rhythm will only make up a portion of your prose writing, whereas it typically makes up the entirety of a poem.

Elements of rhythmic writing

Rhythm and meter may seem complex, but the core components are very simple. All types of rhythm boil down to two components: the **stressed syllable** and the **unstressed syllable**.

How, though, do we actually define rhythm? On the most basic level, it's defined as the **pattern of stresses in writing**. These patterns are more visible in poetry, but they are useful in prose because we naturally use stressed and unstressed syllables when we speak. Therefore, rhythm is very useful in prose for dialogue exchanges, to help make characters' lines seem more realistic.

Stressed syllables

A stressed syllable is one that sounds longer than other syllables. This is most noticeable when you pair the stressed syllable with an unstressed one.

For example, take a look at the word "power." In speech, we naturally put the emphasis on the *pow* part of this word. Compare this to a word like "idea" where we put the emphasis on the *-dea* part of the word.

Where you arrange the stress in your writing affects how audiences read your words. You can also play with stresses in creative ways to give certain characters a more rhythmic way of speaking.

For example, imagine you have two characters talking. While this is prose and not poetry, you can sometimes treat their lines of dialogue as if they are lines from a poem. This encourages you to vary your sentence length (which helps the writing sound more realistic) and consider what type of rhythmic meter is best suited to a character. The consecutive stressed syllables are great to express that a character is angry, scared, or frustrated. Meanwhile, dialogue involving more syllables are great for wordier characters because it lets you effortlessly showcase characters that have a lot to say about a topic (or who just enjoy the sound of their own voice).

Rhythm and Flow

Unstressed syllables

Verbally, these are the **shorter-sounding syllables**. Once again, it's easier to notice when placed next to an opposite longer syllable.

For example, take a look at the word “debate.” In speech, we naturally put the emphasis on the *bate* part of the word rather than the *de-* part of the word. The *de-* in “debate” is the unstressed syllable.

Being able to visually or verbally identify the differences between stresses is important. But the real magic comes from the way you make these syllables interact!

The interaction between stressed and unstressed syllables

Both rhythm and meter are easy to understand but complex to master. As you practice your own word rhythm, though, you may discover surprising ways that different syllable combinations can enhance your own writing.

Rhythm works to help certain sounds to leap off the page. For example, “pounding” is a word with one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. This helps to emulate the initial sound of someone knocking on a door, with the stressed sound followed by the receiving sound (emulated by the unstressed part).

Combining syllables with different stresses in certain ways helps put your reader in the mindset of the characters in your writing. When done well, rhythm can help your readers understand who is speaking even without you using dialogue tags. We can see an example of this in this passage from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*:

*“You're right, Harry,” said Hermione in a small voice.
“I'll use the invisibility cloak,” said Harry. “It's just lucky I got it back.”
“But will it cover all three of us?” said Ron.
“All - all three of us?”
“Oh, come off it, you don't think we'd let you go alone?”
“Of course not,” said Hermione briskly.*

Here, different characters speak with their own rhythms. This not only infuses the characters with added personality, but it makes it easier for readers to differentiate who is saying what even when that is not explicitly described.

Rhythm can also make even plain descriptions of characters into something memorable and stylish. You can see that in this passage from Henry James' *The Wings of the Dove*.

“He looked exactly as much as usual—all pink and silver as to skin and hair, all straightness and starch as to figure and dress—the man in the world least connected with anything unpleasant.”

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The irony of this passage is that James is describing someone who he thinks has a very typical appearance. But the poetic rhythm and commentary that interrupts this description makes the man seem elemental (he is all color and form and firmness) rather than someone simply flesh and blood. Because of this, the description stands out in the best possible way.

Finally, rhythm is a great way of conveying a specific mood or vibe to the reader. We can see that in this vaguely-haunting passage from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*:

“It was a park.... And she didn't know their names, but friends she knew they were, friends without names, songs without words, always the best. But there were so many doors, such unexpected places, she could not find her way.”

Here, the rhythm is used to convey the character's uncertainty. Lines like “friends without names, songs without words” would be right at home in a poem. However, this poetic intrusion into what would otherwise be a prosaic moment helps to underscore her helplessness at not understanding something important and how she feels lost even among these familiar touchstones.

Types of meter in rhythmic writing

It's impossible to talk about rhythm without talking about meter and metrical feet.

In writing, feet (sometimes called "metrical feet" or "poetic feet") refer to specific combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables. Meter, meanwhile, refers to the number of these feet in each line. Therefore, saying a poem is written in "iambic pentameter" means that the poem is written using the feet called "iamb", and that there are five iambs in each line (the pent- in "pentameter" means "five").

There are several types of metrical feet that every writer should be familiar with:

1. Iamb

The iamb is arguably the most famous poetic foot in the literary world. That's because Shakespeare used it in many of his most famous works.

An iamb is two syllables: one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed one. One theory held by many is that Shakespeare wrote using iambs because this is how English language naturally flows.

While there are many ways to use iambs, Shakespeare preferred to write in iambic pentameter. That means that each line has ten syllables, so a standard line in Shakespeare's sonnets would have five iambs.

For a perfect example, see Romeo and Juliet's prologue, which is written in this meter. The first line starts with: "Two households, both alike in dignity." This line has five iambs, each beginning with one unstressed syllable, and is followed by several lines using the same pattern.

2. Spondee

The spondee is best understood in opposition to the iamb. While an iamb is made of an unstressed syllable and a stressed syllable, a spondee is made up of two or more stressed syllables in a row.

Spondees are relatively rare in writing because language naturally lends itself to a mixture of stressed and unstressed beats. But you may want to use a stressed syllable followed by another one to express a sense of breathless urgency to your writing.

Arguably the most famous use of spondees comes from Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "Break, Break, Break." The poem begins with those same repeating words ("break, break, break") and shows how rhythm and meter can simulate how waves crash into the shore.

3. Trochee

The trochee is another type of foot that writers should be familiar with. It effectively serves as the mirror image of the iamb: it's one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one.

Earlier, we touched on how memorable "The Raven" is. Its popularity is due in part to Poe having composed the poem using trochaic meter, with lines like "And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting / On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door."

Trochaic meter is a great way to create a memorable beginning to your story. Alternatively, metrical writing can turn the final words of your story into something that's hauntingly memorable, and it can also give certain dialogue an animated vibe that helps to liven up the standard back-and-forth of dialogue exchanges.

4. Dactyl

So far, we've focused on types of feet that use two syllables. But what if you have a word that's more than two syllables?

Dactyls are a type of metrical foot spread across three syllables. In a dactyl, the first syllable is stressed and the second syllable and third syllable are unstressed. An example of this is the word "murmuring".

Because dactyls have three syllables, they're a handy way of creating sound effects in a reader's mind. For example, saying that a running sink is murmuring helps someone imagine both the sound of the water and its amount thanks to the two unstressed syllables simulating a trickle of water.

5. Anapest

Just as the spondee is the opposite of the iamb, the anapest is the opposite of the dactyl. With an anapest, the first syllable and second syllable are unstressed, while the third one is stressed.

The most famous use of anapests might be in Clement Clark Moore's "'Twas the Night before Christmas." Each line contains multiple anapests, starting from the very beginning: "'Twas the Night before

Rhythm and Flow

Christmas, when all through the house.”

Metrical patterns can extend across different words. In this case, “’Twas the night” is one anapest and “before Christ—” is another. “-mas when all” is another anapest, and “through the house” is the final one. The rhythm created by back-to-back anapests made of three syllables gives this work a very musical feel to readers, especially when it is read aloud.

Why is rhythm important in prose writing?

Using rhythm in prose helps to give your writing a greater sense of style and voice. Doing so can make your text more emotional as well as more memorable.

Writing in rhythmic prose can make it more stylistic. We can see a great example of this at the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, with the line “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” the final line of.

Much of this line is written in iambs. This, combined with alliteration, give the whole sentence a very stylistic flourish and an almost musical quality.

It can also help define your own voice in writing. For example, do you want to write in the bleak, unadorned manner of Ernest Hemingway? Or maybe the mythic language of J.R.R. Tolkien? Keep in mind it took these writers years to fine-tune the rhythmic writing that helped define their literary styles.

Exactly how you use rhythm can also lend emotional weight to certain characters and scenes. For example, dialogue that is fast-paced and full of stressed syllables expresses a sense of urgency and even fear. But dialogue that’s slower and full of unstressed syllables may come across as peaceful and laconic.

Rhythm can also help make your writing more memorable. As an example, Cormac McCarthy begins *The Road* using an anapestic meter: “When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night.” Here, rhythm creates a memorable start to his tale, with McCarthy’s rhythmic opening standing in contrast to the general bleakness of his prose.

Does every story need rhythmic writing?

Not all prose needs to rely on rhythmic writing. Just as certain kinds of poetry eschew meter and embrace free verse, certain kinds of fiction may have little in the way of meter or special stress patterns.

With that being said, rhythm doesn’t have to be an all-or-nothing proposition for a writer. Many great writers, including Fitzgerald and McCarthy, don’t use rhythmic patterns in most of their writing. Rather, they selectively use rhythmical patterns to help enhance certain sections (such as the very end and very beginning of books).

Long story short? You can be a great prose writer without consciously incorporating the long and short patterns of meter into your work. But you can treat rhythm as a kind of secret sauce that you add to certain sections in order to help them grab the reader’s attention.

Flow

Writing that “flows” is easy to read smoothly from beginning to end. Readers don’t have to stop, double back, reread, or work hard to find connections between ideas. Stories should draw the reader deeper into the tale and ultimately dump him out at the end, satisfied at having taken the adventure with your characters.

Yet a smooth flow isn’t inevitable. The writer has to work to create it. And a writer could inadvertently disrupt flow, could accidentally drop roadblocks into story, obstructions that keep the reader from smoothly following the tale.

Writing Flow: It’s All About the Transitions

As writers, we spend a lot of time trying to get our words just right. We learn how to put together effective sentences and arrange them in paragraphs. We learn how to construct a scene with all the necessary elements to hold a reader’s attention.

We learn how to create each piece of the story, but very little consideration goes toward the points of transition between those pieces. And that’s where lies the greatest risk of your reader putting down the book and walking away.

Rhythm and Flow

In Elizabeth George's book *Write Away*, there's a chapter titled, "Knowledge is Power, Technique is Glory." Here's a bit of wisdom culled from that chapter:

"Once you have the hang of writing paragraphs that are cohesive, you're ready to think about how to link them together so as to create a seamless narrative. This is a large part of what will propel a reader through your story, and you affect this propulsion by bridging together paragraphs, scenes, events, or actions. Bridging through the creation of transitions maintains the narrative's smooth flow."

She adds, "When you write with an awareness of bridges and transitions, you create an experience for the reader that is seductive and mysterious."

Transitions provide both sentence level cohesion, as well as the glue needed to hold things together on the paragraph level.

A Look at the Micro

Let's start by examining some ways to transition from sentence to sentence or paragraph to paragraph. The ending sentence of one paragraph is either directly related to the first sentence of the next paragraph, or acts as a prompt.

For example, if you end a paragraph like this: "*Mary wasn't sure how she felt about Brian's leaving.*" Then it's natural to begin the next paragraph by explaining Mary's ambivalence: "*On the one hand, she would miss him terribly. On the other hand...*"

This example is rather obvious, but it makes the point. Lead the reader along a logical sequence of narrative thought, and they'll happily go with the flow.

Five Techniques for Stitching Together the Small Pieces

How exactly do you transition smoothly from one sentence to the next? From one paragraph, one idea, even one word to the next?

Try these five techniques to smooth out your story and create beautiful writing flow in every line.

1. Repetition/Overlap

This technique is exactly what it sounds like: repeat the same idea at the end of one section and the beginning of the next.

Here's an example in a paragraph:

[A long paragraph, ending with . . .] In the morning, things would look brighter.

But morning brought a sullen storm that matched Kelsey's depression.

And here's an example in dialogue:

"You're just looking for someone to take the blame."

"I'm looking for someone who deserves the blame."

2. Matching sentence structure

This works well for connecting short, snappy pieces at the end of a longer piece.

Here's an example in a paragraph:

She'd win. He knew it.

She always did.

Note how I gave that last sentence an extra punch by giving it its own paragraph.

And here's an example in dialogue:

Rhythm and Flow

“Get out.”
“You first.”
“You wish.”

3. Turn it around

Finish a sentence or paragraph with one side of the coin, then flip it over to begin the next.
Here's an example:

[A paragraph ending with this sentence . . .] The difficulty arose because Tara didn't understand what drew her to Steve.

With Mark, the attraction had been all too apparent.

And another example:

Peggy would find another job. She'd contact the agency, submit her resume, and-

[A new paragraph detailing the explanation might begin here.] And miss every moment of this.

4. Stimulus and response

Stimulus and response, also known as cause and effect, are obvious tools to help flow and cohesion.
Here's an example:

Mike tossed the car keys to Sarah. [stimulus] She reached out a hand to snag them, [response] but they bounced off her forearm and hit the pavement, skittering into the gutter.

5. Sequel pattern

In his book *Scene & Structure*, Jack M. Bickham introduces a good way to create the thread of continuity we've been discussing. He calls it “Scene and Sequel.” The pattern he uses for his sequels is: *Emotion – thought – decision – action*.

After an action scene, the character will have an emotional response, which will lead to thoughts about the action and response, which will leave her with a decision to be made. That decision will lead to another action, and so it begins again.

This is an organizational pattern that is highly effective.

Big Picture Mechanics

We've looked at some techniques for achieving continuity and writing flow in the small spaces of your story. Let's touch on some things you can do to create a sense of unity throughout your entire story.

1. Consistent details

Use details that weave a consistent thread throughout the story, especially in terms of tone and atmosphere.

Think about the imagery and language you're using and stay true to the overall picture you want to portray. Like an architect who designs his buildings to fit the environment and plans the landscaping to suit the building so that a harmonious whole is created.

2. Unify around theme

Use a central element or symbol to bind the moving pieces of your story into a coherent whole.

As an example, if you were using a river as this central element. Establish the importance of the river early on. You don't have to state this - simply describe it in significant detail, and your reader will sense its substance. Then refer back to the river at certain points and that river becomes the thematic ribbon running through your story.

3. Character traits or features

This is similar to #2, but centers on the attributes of your characters. For instance, you might have a character who walks with a cane and that cane comes into play, symbolically and physically, throughout the story. The imagery creates a flow of ideas that offer cohesion.

4. Setup and payoff

Keeping up a running sequence of setups and payoffs creates continuity, propelling your reader forward.

Little efforts that pay off big

By learning how to achieve continuity in your writing, you magnify your efforts into something magnificent. This is the type of synergy Aristotle had in mind when he coined the phrase: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Continuity is a powerful thing.

Are you aware of continuity and writing flow when you read a book?



Challenge

Using the techniques described in this article, write a story of no more than 3000 words. It can be any genre and point of view you like. If you feel the need to have a list of things to include in your story, select three of the following.

An antique

A sacred place

The girl with the strange tattoo

A nice place to sit

A horse

An origami figure

The strange neighbours

A camera

Someone helps someone to hide

A painting has an eerie presence

A blackened and dented billy

Someone would rather stay at home with the cat

Yet another task marked “urgent”

A new band is playing.



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