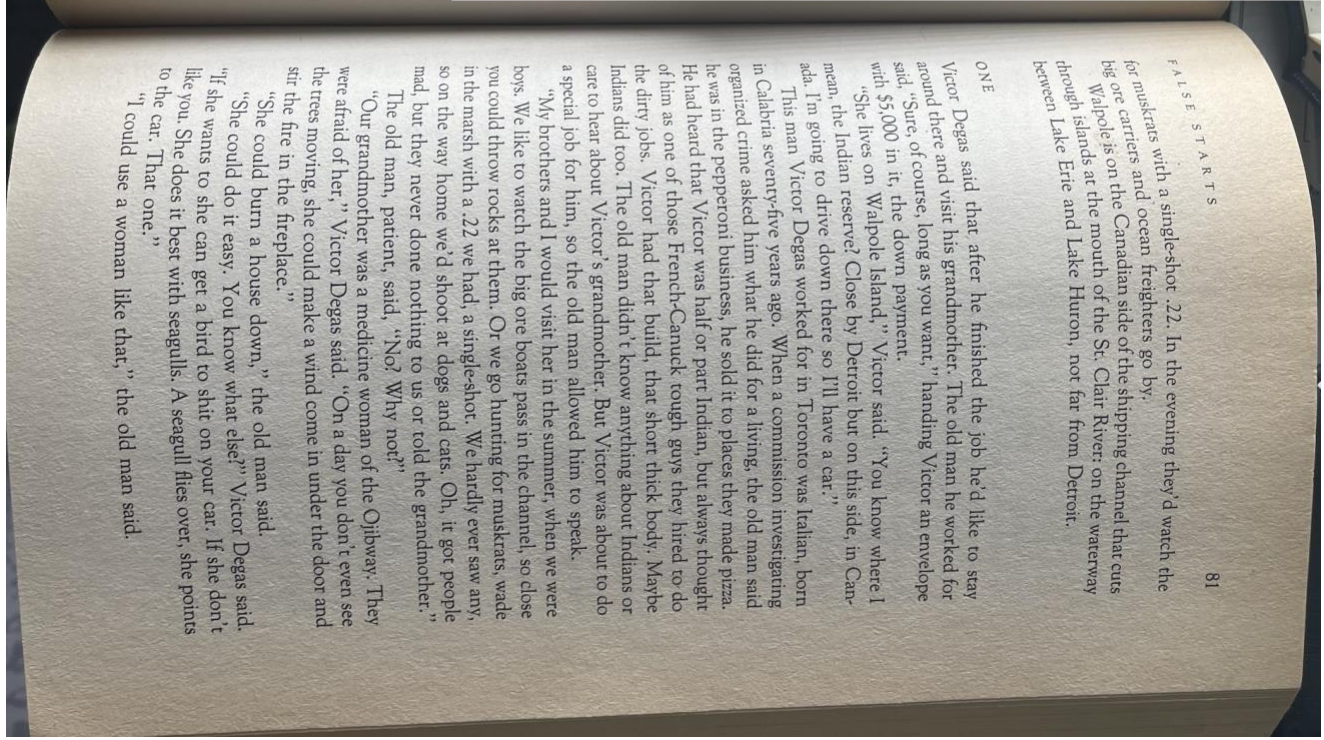
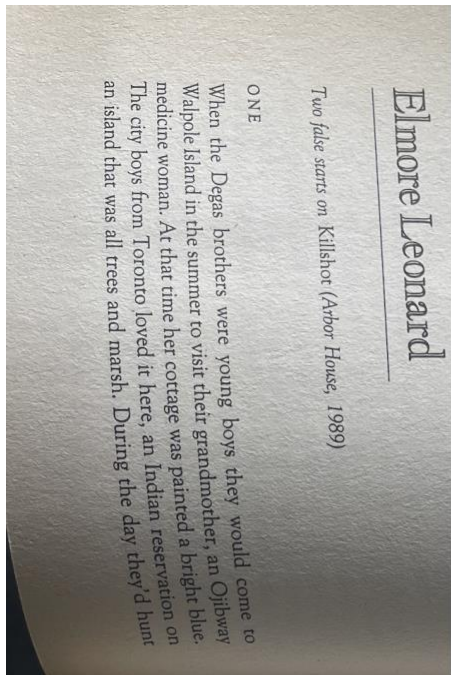


# Some Resources on Pacing by Mysti Berry

Even Elmore Leonard doesn't get it right in the first draft! Compare his first two drafts with the published opening:



**THE BLACKBIRD TOLD HIMSELF** he was drinking too much because he lived in this hotel and the Silver Dollar was close by, right downstairs. Try to walk out the door past it. Try to come along Spadina Avenue, see that goddamn Silver Dollar sign, hundreds of light bulbs in your face, and not be drawn in there. Have a few drinks before coming up to this room with a ceiling that looked like a road map, all the cracks in it. Or it was the people in the Silver Dollar talking about the Blue Jays all the time that made him drink too much. He didn't give a shit about the Blue Jays. He believed it was time to get away from here, leave Toronto and the Waverley Hotel for good and he wouldn't drink so much and be sick in the morning. Follow one of those cracks in the ceiling.

The phone rang. He listened to several rings before picking up the receiver, wanting it to be a sign. He liked signs. The Blackbird said, "Yes?" and a voice he recognized asked would he like to go to Detroit. See a man at a hotel Friday morning. It would take him maybe two minutes.

In the moment the voice on the phone said "Detroi-it" the Blackbird thought of his grandmother, who lived near there, and began to see himself and his brothers with her when they were young boys and thought, This could be a sign. The voice on the phone said, "What do you say, Chief?"

"How much?"

"Out of town, I'll go fifteen."

The Blackbird lay in his bed staring at the ceiling, at the cracks making highways and rivers. The stains were lakes, big ones.

"I can't hear you, Chief."

"I'm thinking you're low."

"All right, gimme a number."

"I like twenty thousand."

"You're drunk. I'll call you back."

"I'm thinking this guy 8% of sample at a hotel. he's from

What's the difference in pacing between drafts 1&2 and the published version?

- Internal and external conflict (vs. lovely brain dump in 1<sup>st</sup> versions) IN THE FIRST SENTENCE.
- Call to action in the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph.
- Of course, the trademark Elmore Leonard dialog—realistic, staccato, more conflict than exposition.

## Not all good paces are fast paces

Whether you love Lee Child, Rachel Howzell Hall, Shawn Cosby, or Jennifer Hillier, you know that not every page/scene/act/novel has the same pace throughout. Most endings are faster than the beginning, because of all the juicy stuff that's getting resolved PLUS your protagonist is having to work harder than before. You don't have a lot of time to hook your reader with the beginning—but not all hooks have fast paces. (We're hooked by Killshot's opening, but it's contemplative in pace, not quick).

I love Matt Coyle's Rick Cahill series because overall the books have a tense but leisurely pace—just like San Diego has. All the things going on in SD county with a slow veneer of surfer-inspired laid-back attitude. Until key points in the story, where the pace is fast as the antagonists get stronger and the protagonist has harder problems to solve.

## More about pacing in a single scene

Just like the overall story/book, there's structure to propel the reader along:

- Call to action
- Conflict
- Stakes that rise
- Plant a seed for conflict in the **next** scene in the middle of this scene
- Write an end that settles the conflict "for now"
- Use subtext in the dialog to create suspense
- Always be answering the "who cares" question. He has a \*reason\* for remembering.

So pace isn't so much a set of rules like structure rules such as "stakes must rise over time" or "elide the boring stuff with temporal ellipsis or summary." Instead, **how** you implement the structure and narrative of a story will inevitably affect the pace.

That said, I have a couple of rules 😊

## 1. Use the Twin Engines of Suspense and Anticipation

The sweet spot for pulling people through your story is to have them in a state where both of the following statements are true:

- **Anticipation:** The reader knows that something has to happen (a puppy tied to railroad tracks and that train is headed for the puppy!)
- **Suspense:** The reader doesn't know exactly what will happen (the puppy's owner doesn't know, the kid who knows is far away—how will the puppy get away?)

Whether the pace of an individual scene is fast or slow, having these twin engines will pull your reader through the story, giving the reader the sensation of a briskly-paced story overall.

## 2. Space things out and vary the pace

Space out clues and red herrings so that the reader receives tasty snacks all along the trail.

Use a variety of paces to keep the reader engaged. For example:

- Kristen Lepionka's *The Last Place You Look*'s opening has a slow, leisurely pace—but during that scene, we find out that a man's going to be executed soon. So we have anticipation & suspense.
- Faye Snowden's *A Killing Fire* varies the length of chapters.
- Vary what your main character is doing. Scene after scene of questioning witnesses can leave a story feeling poorly paced.

## 3. Don't worry about pacing in the first draft. You'll get there.

As you read your first draft, note where you get bored or want to skip ahead:

- Are all your paragraphs the same length?
- Do you answer everything for the reader, or are issues raised and then left in suspense for another chapter?
- Does the rhythm vary? Sentence length & complexity, dialog, and description.
- Do you slow time down in an intense action sequence? Think of "Bullet in the Brain" by Tobias Wolff (2 whole pages of prose \*after\* "The bullet smashed Anders skull." That is a leisurely pace because the story isn't about whether Anders dies. MOTIVATE the pace.
- Do you speed the story along using temporal ellipsis or summary?
  - Temporal ellipsis—just don't write the dull bits. The reader will fill them in without being told. Thrillers do this a lot. (So does a lot of British crime fiction television. During *Silent Witness* and several others, I often would wonder where plot threads had gone...)
  - Summary—instead of writing the whole scene, just quickly summarize what happened and move on. Detective fiction does this a lot.

## Two Examples

**Example 1:** In about 50 of the short stories I read for a contest, the story started with a “hooky” first page, a nice sense of voice, tone, and what the story is about. Then the story ground to a halt for over two pages (longer in some cases) with pure exposition—usually backstory. This killed the pace of the story. Backstory in exposition seldom answers the “who cares” question.

**Example 2:** Changing POV amongst characters can crush pace—you just get going on a storyline and WHAM now you have to switch heads and who is this guy again and do I care about him? But that said, I counted over 20 time-shifts in the opening of Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* (unacknowledged crime fiction IMHO), and we’re riveted, despite the fact that the opening is a teenager taking all afternoon to bury his mean grandpa. We stay fascinated because each switch in time is explaining more about what this kid is doing and why (not exposition-explaining, but giving the reader a good idea about things that the POV character doesn’t understand).

If you are going to yank the reader from head-to-head or through different times and places, make sure it’s motivated by the character’s goal and the conflicts that arise in pursuit of that goal. Not just that you want to work something into the story to “tell” the reader about it.

## Exercise

In film school, we broke down scripts to figure out how they worked. You can do the same:

1. Pick a book whose pace especially delighted you—be it Lee Child or Shawn Cosby or Patricia Highsmith or Charlotte Armstrong (*The Chocolate Cobweb* is weirdly modern!).
2. Make a list of all the main parts of the book (usually 3 or 5 or 7, depending on your favorite structure theory), and decide what the pace of that hunk is. Or just take a chapter and break it down. Or just a scene.
3. Try to work out what the author did to create that sense of pace, and also how she did it, and why.

Can you think of other ways, just as strong, of pacing the story. What would you change? Sentence or paragraph length? Add some dialog? Remove some description? Stretch out a climactic scene so that it feels like that funny elongated time sense we have in real life during emergencies? What would you cut to speed things along? What would you add to answer the “who cares” question?