# The Techniques of Establishing Pacing in Dramatic Writing

by Phoebe Roberts

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At its most basic, pacing is the speed at which the plot of a story moves. A story with events that come immediately one after another is said to have a fast pace, while a story whose plot has more space between the steps that move it forward would be progressing at a slow pace. As it relates to the writing process, pacing is specifically how the writer chooses to control the speed of that unfolding. The management of pacing is essential to creating a sense of engagement with the audience in the story a play is telling. It is one of the most effective techniques a writer has available to encourage the audience to want to know what is going to happen next. Audiences do not want to wait to be engaged in a piece, or else their attention will be lost, and the easiest way to grab them is to display a series of interesting events at a good pace.

The challenge of establishing effective pacing lies in determining how to dole out pieces of the story at the proper rate. It can mean a very fine balancing act of the elements of plot, the "actions, reactions, complications, surprises, reversals."[1] On one hand, your plot must move along briskly. Modern audiences tend to have less patience for drawn-out buildups; they want to get to the action and interesting stuff right away if their attention is to be grabbed. And even once you've earned their attention enough for them to want to learn more, they will become frustrated if they see no progress. With too long a period of no new and interesting information, they will eventually grow bored. But on the other hand, your plot must not give away everything too quickly or they will find that progress unsatisfying.

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[1] Hatcher, Jeffrey. *The Art & Craft of Playwriting*. Cincinnati, OH: Story, 2000. Print. 85.
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The techniques you use and the requirements of how you must keep your audience's attention vary depending on the length and cast size of the play. The first factor to consider is time— both the time you have to fill, and the timing of each plot event. Pacing is a measure of the frequency of actions, so timing them properly is essential to an engaging story. A longer play like a two-hour full-length can afford to take a little bit longer getting into the thick of things, but at the same time, it is easier to become bored the longer it goes on. To establish appropriate pace, there must be enough action to fill the time, and the actions must be spaced out a little bit more so as to achieve a satisfying and appropriately-placed climax. A shorter play requires less action to become full, but that means the action must be particularly well-chosen to make the most of every moment. It must move quickly to reach emotional payout within its time limit, but it must also take care not to so overstuff itself that the audience cannot parse its true point. Cast size also can affect the speed of plot movement, and the techniques of establishing pacing change depending on how many characters the writer has to work with. Depending on the writer's strategy, any sized cast can be used to speed up or slow down the pacing. As cast size increases, so too does the number of agents able to move or impede the plot, and so more characters provide the writer with more opportunities to control the speed of the pace.

To begin with small plays, things move along faster when there are fewer threads to follow with corresponding fewer character issues. The challenge of theater is to depict the course of a change in a dramatic situation, which is an enormous and delicate task for the short period a play runs. As Lajos Egri says, "A character who travels from one pole to the opposite… has to be on the move constantly to traverse this immense space in the allotted two hours in the theater."[2]

[2] Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*. Rockville, MD: Wildside, 2011. Print. 223.

And of course things move along slower when there are fewer people to act on the plot or inject fresh material. An example of a small play with obvious elements affecting the pacing would be *'Night, Mother* by Marsha Norman. There are only two characters in this play, Jessie and her mother Thelma, and the two of them can be roughly defined as protagonist and antagonist respectively. This is known to be a very fast-paced play because the speed is defined solely by the nature of the conflict between this protagonist and antagonist, and because there are no other factors (ie, other characters) acting on the resolution thereof. The speed of plot movement is often highly influenced by how proactive the characters are— those that act as agents of action serve as the driving force of plot progression. In the example of *'Night, Mother*, the protagonist Jessie is working towards a clearly defined goal, to kill herself before the end of the evening. Jessie is highly motivated in pursuit of this goal, and so acts an inexorable plot mover in her efforts to achieve both to get things done as well as to kill herself by a certain time. Jessie's single-minded determination makes everything else she needs to do feel like an obstacle she must overcome, so she diligently takes action to push them aside. But besides her self-imposed time limit, her only possible obstacle could be her mother, and Thelma does not do much to stop her. She, the antagonist, is not nearly as active as Jessie is. Thelma may not be very cooperative, which requires Jessie to work harder to accomplish things in her remaining moments, but in not really believing that Jessie is going to do anything, she doesn't do very much to thwart the ending from coming to pass. Therefore Jessie is the one to set the pace, and if she is striving a mile a minute, then there is nothing stopping the story from hurtling toward its resolution at this speed. This is an excellent example of how the pacing is affected by the number of active or inactive characters— if there were more characters working against Jessie, then the pacing could

be very different, but as there is only one proactive person against zero proactive people, the plot moves according to one person's direction very quickly.

Contributing to the fast pace in this play is the firm "time limit" established— Jessie has decided that she is going to kill herself at the end of the night, and there is nothing in the world that can dissuade her. It is not the typical urgency of a life-or-death situation, as it is made excruciatingly clear that there is no question of whether or not she will die. In plays with more characters there may have been a possible other source of urgency, such as someone trying to stop her, or perhaps an additional, completely independent thread of plot that would require taking a break from Jessie's story to explore. But since this two-character play contains only an active protagonist and a passive antagonist, the source can only be from the efforts of the single dynamic character. The tension is created by the sense that time is running out for her while she has unfinished business, that there will be a point at which she will have no more time to do anything. There is no one to help her, but there is also no one to stop her. The causes the audience to feel like time is moving by quickly while in the grip of the suspense over whether or not she will be able to "fit everything in," creating a sense of a fast-moving plot. Things must move fast in this story if anything is to happen in it before it, and Jessie, ends.

The pacing of a medium-sized show like *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell is very different. This show's plot is driven less by the will of a single character unopposed by anyone else, but rather by the desire of the protagonists to solve the central mystery of the plot. The characters' asking the question encourages the viewers to do the same— "Why would this woman suddenly murder her husband?" —which inspires interest and identification with the protagonists Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale. "Why?" is a compelling question for audiences, and it makes them want to gather pieces of information to answer it. This motivation creates a drive for the protagonists, pushing

the Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale to look for clues to shed further light on the situation, which is the driving force pushing the plot forward. Clues, however, can be hard to find, especially when you don't know what you're looking for. The difficulty and delay involved in finding clues slows the ladies down in spite of their determination to push forward, which provides balance to the pace. They are moving forward, but due to these obstacles, it's not excessively quickly. Pacing is an important tool for ensuring the ultimate satisfaction of the audience's investment. It is only the first step to make the audience desire to know more; after capturing their interest, the writer must then deliver information that will satisfy their curiosity. A steady, well-timed stream of plot events gives the interested onlookers what they want and keeps them engaged for the full duration of the play. Good pacing allows that the play "…will rise continuously, reaching a pitch which will be the culmination of the entire drama"[3]— not only for the setting but also the eventual meeting of the viewers' expectations. The pace, established by the pattern of obstacle and overcoming of the obstacle, is satisfying to the audience, as viewers want to see them be successful, but not to breeze through their challenges too easily.

The structure of the action also acts a catalyst to move the action forward, again combining progress with the appropriate amount of struggle to make it interesting. If time is the first factor to consider in pacing, action is the second. One must balance the amount of action in the play so that interesting things keep coming, but not to the point where there is too much for the audience to process and for the story to adequately resolve. Considering the relation of cause and effect can help contribute to establishing appropriate pace. Taking care to design a sequence of events where each occurrence incites the next leads to a logical unfolding at clip that feels smooth and natural. Making use of the concept of forwards can also create this. David Ball

[3] Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*. Rockville, MD: Wildside, 2011. Print. 248.

defines a forward as "anything that arouses an audience's interest in things yet to come,"[4] an action that provokes another action, operating on the principle that all occurrences are the effects resulting from a cause. Since this matches up with what we experience in real life, this method pushes things along in a credible, measured way. This structure is made possible by the slightly larger number of characters, allowing it to alternate between sections of searching for and parsing out the clues by the protagonists and sections where the secondary characters appear and shift their mindset in a slightly different directly. The story is spurred on by a series of questions, did she really do it, how did it happen, what made her do it, et cetera. The women protagonists take action in the sections containing just the two of them in order to answer these questions. The efficacy of these actions makes progress, but the limitations of their information gather ability impedes that progress. When they reach the end of their current rope, exhausting what they can extrapolate from their current discoveries, the progress seems to halt. But to move things along again, the author has the men return and pose a new question or point them in another direction. With fewer characters, this method of moving things forward would not be possible. Instead it would have to consist of the two women working through their roadblocks themselves, which would be a much slower process than the men appearing and simply delivering new information and encouraging them to regard the situation from a slightly different perspective. But then, "like the problem of the joke-teller who takes too long to get to the punchline, the playwright who prolongs the revelations until too deep into the play is simply using delaying tactics, and the audience will grow weary and finally tune out."[5] The presence of these secondary characters permits the plot to move forward again as the main characters explore the new additional

[4] Ball, David. *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1983. Print. 45.

[5] Hatcher, Jeffrey. *The Art & Craft of Playwriting*. Cincinnati, OH: Story, 2000. Print. 83.

dimension they bring to the mystery. This would be very difficult in a smaller cast play, as something like *'Night, Mother* did not have enough characters to make some leave and return again, bringing new information along with them to move things forward.

A large-cast play such as Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, with eight characters, has a means of setting the pace that smaller-cast plays do not have, and uses the greater number both to keep things moving forward and prevent things from resolving too quicky. If the plot needs to progress faster in a larger-cast show, there is an advantage in how by having more characters a writer has more vectors for the introduction of new information and agents of activity. Plot action can come about through the characters taking action, as well as if they reveal data that has repercussions on how other agents behave in the story. It, like *Trifles*, is a mystery, which encourages the audiences as well as the character to seek answers to certain questions. "Who did it?" "Why did they do it?" and "What will they do next?" tend to be compelling and are posed early on to give direction to the action. The plot advances more quickly the more attention the character devote to unraveling it, which keeps things moving forward. *The Mousetrap* uses its large cast to vary from the traditional detective story in that it does not have a designated "detective" figure, but rather a number of people, the entire contents of the Ralstons' guest house, that all would like to find the murderer. With so many characters, from Mollie and Giles Ralston to the secret policeman Major Metcalf to odd Christopher Wren, designated as protagonists, the writer has many vehicles for introducing action.

Of course, a mystery is not compelling without some obstacles to solving it, which has the side effect of slowing down the pace. The progress of this play toward revealing the identity of the murderer is checked in some ways by some common mystery tools such as red herrings and misdirection. The pace must necessarily not go too quickly here, because as David Ball says,

"Often the core of dramatic tension resides in the keeping information from the audience. Don't negate the tension by premature revelation."[6] But with this larger cast, things can be slowed simply by the greater time required to explore each character's arc. Each one is at the house for a reason, and whether their tale is directly related to the mystery, such as Miss Casewell being the killer's sister who is searching for him, or if they are merely a false lead like Christopher Wren, it takes time for their story to unfold— much more time for eight of them than if they were a cast of a smaller size. In addition, the play suggests that the culprit is one among the eight of them. This means there are many possibilities for the identity of that culprit, which keeps the audience guessing. It takes time to eliminate the various possibilities when there are this many of them, a way of drawing things out that a smaller-cast play would not be able to utilize. Interestingly, the closest character to being the designated detective character is Sergeant Trotter, who is actually the perpetrator they are searching for. Though he is ostensibly leading the investigation, he is actually impeding it to serve his own, preventing the other characters from making the discovery of his guilt that would bring about the plot resolution. The use of these techniques draws out thee suspense and increases the tension, which in turn keeps the pace from racing along too quickly. The combination of determined "detective" figures seeking answers as well as pointed misdirection balances the pace to a good clip, neither frustrating the audience's desire to know more nor failing to build tension and revealing the surprise ending before the right time.

It is also crucial to the building of suspense. A sense of suspense creates a strong desire in the viewer to stick around to find out what happens next. An audience that has been strung along just the right amount, worrying about the ultimate fate of the plot and characters, becomes eager to witness the next development. Audiences respond well to being given questions to ask and

[6] Ball, David. *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1983. Print. 34.

mysteries to solve. The sense of engagement is built by hints of the yet-to-be-revealed often far more than by facts stated outright with no mystery to them, and as with any surprise, to let it be known too early is to spoil it. Suspense also increases tension, which heightens conflict, which ultimately makes for better drama. The large size of the cast also assists with this balance. The setting is a boarding house, which allows a large group of strangers to be thrown together into the same place, and the device of the snowstorm traps them in that place. Having many different people, each with their own disparate agenda, all working to achieve their desires pushes the action along. Events occur thickly when there are many agents who take action to shape the story. Particularly when you have "criminals" who want to do wrongs and "detectives" who want to solve the crime, you have a lot of forwards to create action. But having so many actors also presents many stumbling blocks to plot furtherance. All the conflicting desires of these people cause them to work against each other— again increased by the adversarial relationship of the "criminal" and the "detective" —which add complications. Complications further delay of the realization of their efforts, so the ultimate resolution is pushed off until the raised conflict can be overcome.

I found these plays particularly useful to have studied from this perspective when establishing pacing in my own play, *Mrs. Hawking.* This was also a mystery, and so would need to rely on the tools of the mystery story, such as the investigating detective figure and the need to deduce the truth from clues, similarly to *Trifles* and *The Mousetrap*. It is also a larger play on the order of the Christie piece. I used similar techniques as these two pieces to make use of my cast size to manage *Mrs. Hawking*'s pacing. Mrs. Hawking and Mary are my detective figures, and in pursuing the unraveling of their mystery they are the primary forward movers of the plot. They serve as dual protagonists, just as *Trifle*s' Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale do, which allows them to

share information, work as a team, and bounce ideas off each other. Having two protagonists instead of one stands in marked contrast to lone protagonist Jessie in *'Night, Mother*, whose only real obstacle is that she has no help or support. Mrs. Hawking also utilizes a similar structure to how the mystery is worked through in *Trifles*. As with the Susan Glaspell piece, the two detective figure protagonists alternate between periods where they are just the two of them, talking things out, making plans and drawing conclusions based on gathered information, and periods where they interact with other characters and outside situations that change the circumstances and inject new material into the story. Mrs. Hawking and Mary move as far as they can on their own, just as the ladies in *Trifles*, but having additional cast members provides sources of new actors on the plot, bringing dimensions that the protagonists could not contribute on their own. Observe how they receive their "mission briefing" by hearing the problem from Celeste Fairmont, then go out "into the field" at Brockton's ball to gather information. They retire to private to parse what they've learned and plan their next move. They then emerge again by staking out their suspect at the empire club, after which they return again to private to talk out what happened there. The pace is driven forward by making these forays, reacting to the events of those forays, and then deciding what to do for their next move based on that. A large number of additional cast members means a wider variety of motivations that could drive them to act on the plot, providing the variety of pushes required to drive the story. This is the way the pieces of the mystery are parceled out one by one to keep things moving forward. But just as it does in *The Mousetrap*, many characters means many disparate agendas that are not always working towards the same goal. Disparate agendas often come in conflict with each other, impeding each other's progress toward resolution. The gentleman in the Empire Club, for example, has no knowledge of Mrs. Hawking's desire to keep her presence there concealed, and so blithely goes on about

how he is certain that the service knife he found belonged to her late husband the Colonel. The man mentioning the name Hawking in front of her opponent Brockton throws a wrench in her plan, slowing down her progress toward ultimately solving the mystery and saving Mrs. Fairmont's child. In observing how larger casts can be utilized to manage the pacing in other large-cast mystery plays such as *Trifles* and *The Mousetrap*, I was able to apply them to my own play with a comparable amount of characters, hopefully striking up a balance between a satisfying forward thrust and a suspense-building amount of struggle holding progress back.

Pacing is one of the writer's most powerful means of establishing and maintaining audience engagement. While there are several ways to measure out the rate at which the events of a story, the demands of having active, plot-affecting characters means that the number of agents in your story will necessary manipulate the speed of the pacing. While it may at first glance seem that smaller casts would mean things go along faster and larger casts go along slower, given the time necessary to give each character stage time, but it all depends on the use. When one takes into consideration how characters can either support or deter each other in their goals, or how they can either run out of information or introduce more, it becomes clear that the relationship between cast size and pacing is more complicated. In addition to what you might assume, large casts also afford more opportunities to have agents push things along, while smaller casts often also have no assistance from outside help or new information that might speed up a stalled story. Speed of plot is much more a matter of the strategic additions of facilitations and complications to the driving motivation of a protagonist. The number of characters in the cast simply change the vehicles a writer has at their disposal to introduce those facilitations and complications.