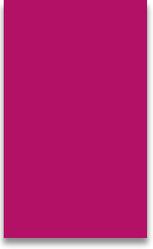# Pacing and Suspense: Using Writing Tools to Increase Story Tension

How can we help student writers tell stories with depth and texture? Learn a variety of techniques for building suspense in narrative writing. We'll examine models and exercises to help students create stories that keep readers riveted.

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Write about a moment of surprise (real or imagined).

Excerpt about being thrown from a horse at age 7, but wanting to get back on.

After a half dozen or so circuits around the ring, a young girl – a stable worker – entered from the observation area, crossed to the metal doors on the other side, slid open a heavy metal door flooding the area with light, then turned and with a swift motion slammed the door shut behind her.

Whaaaaaack!

Suddenly I was on the ground with my breath knocked out of me.

Moment of surprise lacks suspense

sus·pense   /səˈspens/

Definition

- a state or feeling of excited or anxious uncertainty about what may happen.

- the intense feeling an audience experiences while waiting for the outcome of certain events.

- leaves the reader holding their breath and wanting more information.

- makes the reader ask, "What's going to happen next?"
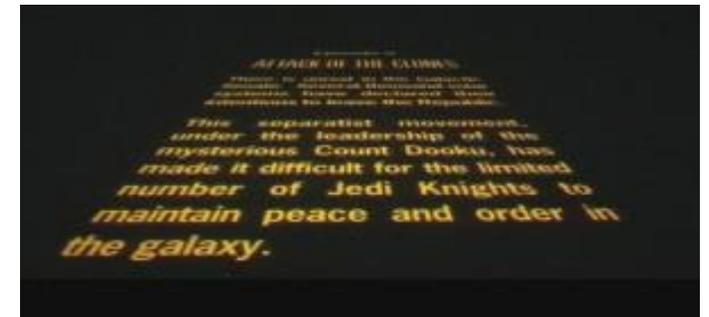
Suspense Killers

Monotonous Style

Do the sentences all look alike? Same length? Same type? Similar verbs?
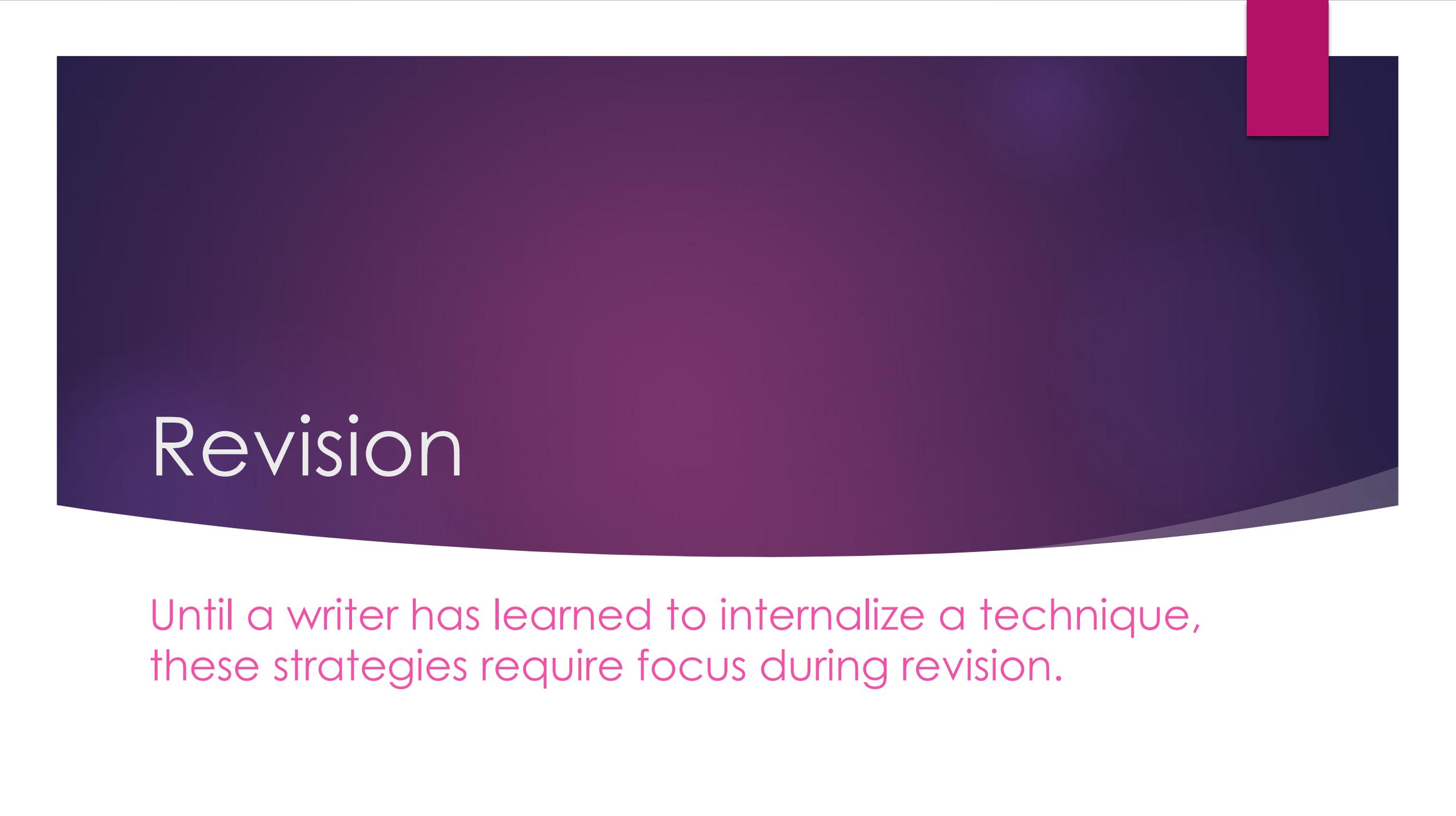

Pacing Issues

Does the writer breeze over the good stuff and describe (in excruciating detail) things that have little meaning in the story?

Prologues

Does the story take a long time to get to the conflict? Does the writer insist that some things just *must* be known before the story even begins?

Revision

Until a writer has learned to internalize a technique, these strategies require focus during revision.

Monotonous Style

Do the sentences all look alike?

The sophistication of student writing should change and grow over time.

- balance dialogue and narration
- incorporate sentences of different types and lengths
- like a movie, cut to a different angle, character, setting, scene
- (Lane) apply both snapshots and thoughtshots

Pacing Issues

Does the writer breeze over the good stuff and describe (in excruciating detail) things that have little meaning in the story?

- (Lane) apply both Snapshots and Thoughtshots

- EXPLODE A MOMENT and SHRINK A CENTURY

See handout

BASED ON BARRY LANE'S "SNAPSHOTS" AND "THOUGHTSHOTS" FROM *AFTER THE END*.

Whaaaaack!

The crash of metal on metal reverberated through the ring and the once docile horse instantly reared. Front legs and hooves flew suddenly upward. As his chest lifted to face the wall, all forty pounds of me slid instantly down the length of the horse's back and landed with a thud in a cloud of dust at Smokey's back legs.

The brick of my breath landed somewhere near the base of my ribcage and remained there heavy for a half minute before I could fully inhale again. *I can't move. I can't breathe.* Frozen, I watched hooves tapping a high-step dance around me until a hand lifted me from the dusty flurry of motion beneath the horse.

Prologues

Does the story take a long time to get to the conflict? Does the writer insist that some things just *must* be known before the story even begins?
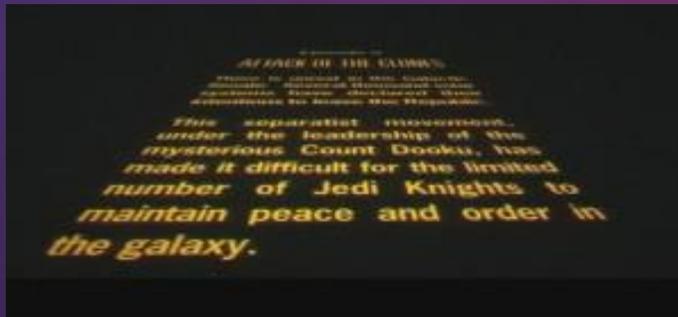
Once the story is drafted, remove the prologue, ask the writer to cut it into chunks, then weave only what MUST be known into the story itself.

Act It Out

▶ Great for younger students. "Notice what you said and did. Now let's write it down."

▶ Tableau – action performed by students and then frozen – to examine and observe.

Is the story more interesting if someone else tells it?

Voices
IN THE PARK
— Anthony Browne
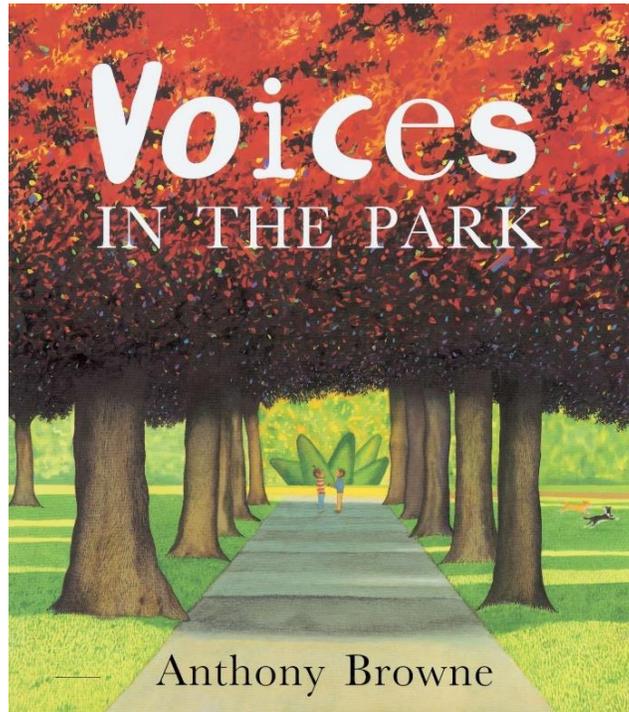
▶ Single story told in four voices. Use to launch discussions about who should tell the story? Whose story is it?

Thank you!

CONTACT ME WITH QUESTIONS OR IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR MORE RESOURCES.

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