

Welcome back. Let's keep fixing our shit in FiYoShiMo day 2. We're still looking at beats, and yesterday we talked about some of the beat categories that we use to push and pull the audience along through the journey of our story. I think before we talk more beats, I need to describe what I mean by "push and pull", since you're going to see a lot of that phrase this month.

Push-pull isn't originally a story concept. It started as a communication strategy, something that people do when selling or presenting to an audience (or potential consumer). It was later co-opted by the completely scummy pickup artist movement, and by the time I learned about it, it was thick with near-rapey stigma.

At its heart, push-pull is the idea that you lead the listener forward and deeper into what you're talking about by creating moments of interest and separation. Since they're talking to you, you assume they're interested and already invested, and then you encourage more investment of their interest by adding details that keep them interested. That's the pull. The push (and where this distinguishes itself from its past) comes NOT from pushing people away to rope-a-dope them in later, but instead from pushing out information that may be of interest maybe immediately and maybe later, but the listener won't know unless they follow along the whole way through.

Let's use an example. You're you, and you've just done something awesome. Doesn't matter what it is, but let's say it was something big, something you didn't think you could do, and you're in a celebratory mood ... let's say you've just done your first NaNoWriMo, and you feel you've accomplished something. You're talking to your friend, who in this example isn't a writer. They read books, sure, they're not a troglodyte, but they're not a writer. So, you start talking to your friend about what the novel is about. They might not "get" the parts where you talk about craft, they might glaze over the sentences where you laugh about your dependent clauses being co-dependent clauses (no, you're not the first person to make that joke) ... but that's the push. You're putting out that information which might interest them later, but it's not directly related to the parts that do interest them, which is the pull, and for our example, it's the parts of the plot that your listening friends want to read.

You can't tell the whole story without both the push out and pull in of information. Why? Because you can't account for everyone's likes and dislikes and interests. So you broadcast the whole story, and trust people to pick the parts they like. (Bonus points if you see the parallel here to how you deal with critics.) If you skimp on the push, you're suggesting you can predict what your audience wants, or you're deciding for them what will interest them, because they're not capable of deciding for themselves. If you skimp on the pull, you're not providing spots for the audience to invest, and you're suggesting you don't think yourself worthy of your audience or that your story isn't good enough to be cared about. And that's bullshit. In our example, this person you're talking to is your friend, and they do care, otherwise you would just go find another friend-human who would.

Take advantage of every opportunity to push and pull with your audience. This is your connection to them, and like any relationship, you want that connection to be as stable as it can be, even if it's fluid. Don't walk on eggshells thinking that if you start going off in some story direction, you're going to make people hurl the book across the room and they'll swear off reading things forever. Sorry, you're just not that powerful. They might not like the book, they might not read any more of your stuff, but

you're not going to send them running to watch vapid half-hour comedies about nerds or fat husbands with shrew wives. The audience comes the book to take the ride, and you're going to give them a hell of one. You're not minding baby ducks; you don't need to hover over them to make sure none get lost. Trust them to make their own decisions about how they invest their time and energy, and don't restrict yourself by trying to predict how they're going to respond - there's one of you, and how many of them? Chasing down all their responses is a quick road to madness and writer frustration.

I'd love to be able to tell you that push-pull can be mastered after one novel. Or one year. Or ten. Like so many other writing tools in our toolbox, mastery is an ever-fluid process. Don't hunt it down. Go for fluency. Go for comfortable using it, that you could use it well enough to get by and have it be helpful, sort of like how people view Microsoft Excel or social media - you don't need to be the number one go-to guru, you just need to know which end is up.

We'll revisit push-pull a lot this month, it'll come up when we talk about things like character traits or plot resolution. It'll be seen in exposition and narration. Like your friend's mom, it gets around.

You can see the impact of push-pull on the beats we're going to talk about today. Yesterday we outlined action, investigation and emotional beats. Now we're going add some depth to beats. Let's see how we can torque beats to give them some extra weight, sticking power, and impact.

There are two ways to approach any beat. So, to follow along, I want you to get some of what you wrote. You can use the stuff from yesterday if you want, or you can find new stuff. Doesn't matter, so long as you can pick out some beats. I'll wait right here for you.

All set? Armed with words? Onward then.

Pick a beat. If you haven't already, identify it. Don't worry about the consequence yet, we'll get there in a few paragraphs. For now, just label the beat. As an example, I'll do an action beat:

A woman robs a liquor store. She draws a gun on the cashier and tells him to fill a pillowcase with money. The cashier complies, but moves too slow for the woman's liking, so she shoots him in the chest. She leaves as the cashier bleeds all over the instant lottery tickets behind him.

(what? I swear the next beat will be cheerier, quit looking at me like that)

That's an action beat with an expected consequence. It's got several moving parts that we know about:

- i. We know she's got a gun, and that it works.
- ii. We know she makes an overt demand for money.
- iii. We know the cashier complies.
- iv. We get a sense of the robber's impatience.
- v. We see the end result of the bullet entering the cashier.

Here's what isn't mentioned:

- a) We don't know why she's robbing the store.
- b) We don't know if the cashier actually is moving slow or not.
- c) We don't know what the cashier is feeling or thinking as the blood leaves their body.

- d) We don't know what the cashier is thinking while the robbery is happening.
- e) We don't know any of what happens next.

Now maybe in that beat, we like some parts more than others. For me, I like the moment she pulls the gun. I like her impatience. I like the gunshot moment. Maybe you like the blood. Maybe you like the cashier putting money in a pillowcase. We don't have to like the same things, let alone for the same reasons. Those things we like pull us in.

The stuff we don't like, the stuff that's necessary for the beat to develop but it just isn't making us as excited as the other stuff, that's the push. We need the whole beat, and in order to get the whole thing, we need those parts that don't jazz us up. We wade through the not-so-cool to get to the cool stuff. Was it really so torturous? In our example, it's a chunk of sentence.

So that's an action beat. It's also a direct action beat. **A direct beat is a beat with some kind of consequence that immediately connects to and furthers the plot.** Let's say that our action beat example is the opening scene for our story, and our story is some crime fiction about a lady robber making her way in the city. Even if this is a flashback to her lowest moment, even if this isn't an opening to the story, so long as this ties to plot, it's a direct beat.

Direct beats form the spine for a story. Everything in the story from beginning to end is going to get framed by those direct beats. They're both a boundary and a foundation, they're the results of the decisions you've made in writing (**Remember - Rule #1 Writing is the act of making decisions.**) If you're still not sure what direct beats look like, they're also the things we tell each other when we summarize things we've read or watched:

Girl gets selected for membership in dystopic youth Thunderdome  
She impresses people by being the most special  
She fakes her way into a romance, then falls in love with her co-competitor  
She spins this love into a plan of action to topple a government, somehow Philip Seymour Hoffman shows up in one of his final roles.

There, I gave you (my slightly biased) direct beats for The Hunger Games films.

Now, summarize for me your NaNo novel. Go ahead. Give me as much detail as you want, take your time. This isn't a pitch, I just want you to summarize what happens. How does it start? And then what happens? And after that?

Direct beats. All of that. Yes, you paraphrased, but you're still giving direct beats.

Now let's flip the coin over. If there's a direct beat, what's an indirect beat. **An indirect beat is something that happens as a reaction to a direct beat, but isn't a direct beat itself.** This gets a little tricky for people, since we're not just talking reactions. Reactions can be direct beats - our example robber shoots the gun, the cashier bleeding is a reaction and direct beat that advances the plot, especially if we kill the cashier off. So now we have to zoom out a little. Let's look at what the scenes we're breaking down in order:

1. The woman makes a decision to and then acquires the gun.
2. She robs the liquor store and kills the cashier
3. The police begin to track her down after talking to the cashier's family

That's the flow of the story. Maybe you've got them on notecards or an outline. There are indirect beats throughout those 3 scenes. Does this woman argue with anyone about the decision to get the gun? Is the cashier's family grieving? Are they angry? Those are all reactions to the direct beats, but they themselves don't become direct beats until acted upon.

If she does argue with someone, say a girlfriend, if that girlfriend moves out, and because the girlfriend moves out our female robber descends into further crime, then we're talking direct beat. But just moving out with no "and then" attached? Indirect. Same with the grieving family. It's all indirect until the parents of the cashier decide to seek their own justice.

An indirect beat doesn't forward the plot, it enriches the story by adding emotional weight, or emphasis on character decisions or actions. It's the realization you like Hamilton, and you're worried that if you confess the number of times you listen to the whole soundtrack during a workday, you'll be shunned from the writer/editor colony.

Indirect beats inform future plot. It helps shape the "why" things are happening, leaving the "how" for direct beats later. If you look at the notecard trick linked above, those additional vertical layers we built, those all frame out as indirect beats.

Yes, the potential of the indirect beat is that it *could be* made direct. It's all about potential, a unit of stored energy you can tap or not, and it's fine either way. You don't have to turn all the indirect beats into direct ones, and you don't need to have corresponding indirect beats for each direct one. Going one step further, you aren't limited to a one-to-one ratio. Who's to say that the dead cashier doesn't have both grieving parents AND a secret lover? Who's to say the robbery wasn't the best thing to happen to our lady because now she gains street cred as an unintended benefit of her efforts, even if the guilt sends her spiraling into addictions or insomnia?

This is all part of the construction of story. Look at your scenes. You've found the direct beats already. Do you see the indirect ones? Are any there? Could you find space to add some? Do you have too few, meaning you're not letting things go unsaid, which means you're not letting the reader fill in any blanks, which means they're not really investing in the story (because you aren't giving them space to)? Do you have too many? Are you cheating yourself by letting the reader fill in too many gaps?

That last part there, that balance, that's the tricky bit. There's no formula, it's done via a lot of feel and drafting and revision. So, practice. Rewrite the scene where you think you can do a better job with direct and indirect beats. Share it. Share it on Twitter. In an email. To your friends. To me. To whomever. Just go practice.

Tomorrow on FiYoShiMo, we start a discussion about tone. You'll need your opening chapter handy.

See you then.