

Writing fight scenes

Location

Choose a location that's in context with your plot: a practice field, a castle ruin, an urban estate. Involve the setting in the action: the fighters may slip on the muddy slope, leap across the fence, slam their opponent against the wall. And make the escape route narrow or difficult.

Build-Up

Before the fight begins, build suspense for the fight; is it a known confrontation, a request for a seeming innocuous meeting or a complete curveball? How is the character feeling about it?

Weapons

Use weapons which really exist at the time of writing. Musket or flintlock, Revolver or pistol? Gladius or spatha? Also make sure that the weapon of your choice can really be used the way your protagonist uses it: not every sword can cleave a skull, not every gun can stop a running fugitive. If you invent a weapon, model it closely on existing genuine weapons. Photon torpedoes are not totally unrealistic...

Skills

Make sure the fighters use only skills they actually have. Usually it takes hard training over a long period to acquire close quarter fighting competence. Saying that, some people are naturals. But try not to use the cop-out of super-powers, unless you are writing for Marvel Comics.

Pacing

To create a fast pace, use short paragraphs, short sentences, short words. These convey the breathlessness and speed of what's happening. And slice the action up into short, sharp jabs of information. Even though most fights are over in a matter of minutes – it's very tiring – you can keep the excitement going and tension up by describing them in meticulous detail.

Pay attention

Show only what your antagonist sees in that moment: his opponent's face, his opponent's hands, his opponent's weapon. He can't afford to look elsewhere, because if he takes his attention off the fight for even a second, he's dead.

Sounds and smells

Sounds add to the excitement: weapons (the clanking of swords, the pinging of bullets) or the thudding of flesh on flesh and the cracks of breaking bone.

Smells: sweat, bad breath, blood, and other bodily fluids and products; hydrocarbons, burning, putrefaction; scents, vegetation, rubbish

Dialogue

If your fighters talk while fighting, use very short, incomplete sentences, to convey the breathlessness and to keep it real.

Pain and injuries

Fighting hurts. There have to be injuries and pain. Although the adrenaline may dull the pain during the action, the pain will kick in once the fight is over. You can emphasise the violence with realistic injuries and gore, or play it down by giving your hero just a few bruises and minor flesh wound – but there has to be something.

Afterwards

Survivors take stock of the situation, mourn their dead comrades, bandage their wounds, repair their weapons. What's the status of the winners and fate of the losers? If a battlefield, you can describe the corpses with brains spilling from split skulls, intestines hanging out of abdomens, flies circling and crawling. Or not. Or is the protagonist barely crawling away after a brutal beating by a gang of thugs in a Victorian slum? Or perhaps they are commanding the liberation army from a brutal oppressor? There is always more work to be done.