

**Let's start out with a mediocre action scene, so we have something to fix as we work:**

*Jane jumped over the table to her left and nearly knocked over a knife, which teetered on the edge of the table, almost falling over before she reached down and grabbed it. "Just try it!" she said, swiping at Billy's face.*

*He backed away. "Fuck you, Jane," he said. But before she could respond, he threw out his left fist and tried to punch her.*

*Luckily, she stepped to the right just in time, avoiding the punch. When he tried again, she gripped the knife in her right hand and slammed it into his shoulder, which caused blood to spill through the fabric of his shirt.*

*"You bitch!" Billy yelled, and quickly closed the three feet between them. He sent a right hook flying toward her face, and she ducked beneath it and countered with a left kick toward his knee. She missed him, though. But before she could recover, Billy's left elbow hit her on the bridge of her nose.*

*It hurt. Jane dropped the knife and covered her nose with her hands, screaming.*

**The above scene is... it's alright. But it could be better. Here's how:**

**Suspense is your friend.** To paraphrase Alfred Hitchcock, if you have a scene where a bomb suddenly goes off, the reader will be shocked for a few seconds. But if the reader knows there's a bomb, or suspects there may be a bomb, and that the bomb can detonate any second, you can prolong that shock and even turn it into a growing sensation of horror. A page or so before your fight scene, show us that something is about to go wrong. Rack up tension. Then, boom! Fight begins.

**Use short, choppy sentences (and timing).** Nothing takes away from the intensity of the scene more than a long-winded sentence that keeps going and going and going. Fights happen quickly. Despite what Hollywood would tell you, most are over in a few seconds, and are incredibly difficult to follow. Punches are flying, people are falling, etc., etc. Try to keep 90% of sentences as simple as possible, using longer ones only to focus on emotional moments. (Also: use paragraph breaks and em-dashes to create a false sense of timing. This has the added bonus of increasing the readability of your work.)

**Cut out unnecessary details.** Goes with #1 above. Do we need to know whether Billy is using his left or right fist? No! Do we need to know that the knife almost fell over the edge? No! Do we need to know how much distance is between them? No! Cut that shit out! Fights should be as disorienting in literature as they are in real life. The reader does not need to be perfectly oriented in the space and every action.

**Use power actions.** In a fight, people do not "say" anything. They scream. Snarl. Gasp. Similarly, they might sprint, lunge, grasp, dart, rock, slice. Because you want things to be as short and simple as possible, you must choose your words carefully.

**Take time with your pain and emotion.** Remember that 10% of longer sentences? Here is how you use it. If a character is injured in a significant way, take time to show just how much pain they are in. Research how different wounds feel, and work that into your writing. Perhaps they notice the sound of their injury before they feel it. Maybe the pain is sudden and paralyzing, and they cannot do anything but writhe and scream. In any case, show us what they are feeling and what they are thinking. Is your character desperate? Furious? Heartbroken? Don't forget to make it known!

**With these tips in mind, I would rewrite the scene as follows:**

*Jane reached for something, anything. Her fingers closed around something cool and hard. The knife. "Just try it!" she hissed, swiping at Billy's face. A miss.*

*"Fuck you, Jane!" he snarled, and his fists started flying.*

*She dodged them easily, biding her time. Her fist tightened around the blade. An opening. She needed an opening.*

*There.*

*Jane slammed the knife into his shoulder. A scream pierced the air as blood spilled from the wound.*

*"You bitch!"*

*A fist flew at her jaw. She ducked, kicked. Her foot met air. Come on, come on, she thought, steadying herself. There's got to be---*

*Billy's elbow crashed into her nose.*

*There was a crunch, and sharp pain built between her eyes, spreading from the center of her face toward her temple, her ears. Her cry fell as she did. She clutched her face, feeling hot blood pour between her fingers and over her knuckles, dripping onto the floor.*