**[How to Write Fight Scenes](http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Fight-Scenes)**

**Have competent opponents.** It won't be a very enjoyable read if your hero is a far better fighter than his opponents. A respected opponent makes for a good fight. Mindless goons getting mowed down gets boring, fast. Have the opponent pull surprises.

* If the enemy does come in seemingly endless waves, show the effect on the protagonists. Perhaps the constant fighting in wearing them down, or they realize they're low on ammo.

**Make it real.** Real fighters don't stop to make speeches at each other. In real life, while the adrenaline is pumping, people won't have the energy to compose devious and witty lines. Swearing is common, instinctive and often violent. When someone gets kicked in the jaw, or hit with a headbutt, they rarely just shrug it off as though nothing has happened. When your hero gets hit, make sure your readers can "feel" the hit.

**Consider carefully the effect that your words have on the reader when it comes to perceptions.**

* + Short sentences with little extraneous detail create a faster, more frantic tempo.
	+ Longer sentences with more detail are good but they slow down the tempo and make everything happen slower.
	+ Use both types of sentences to help control the tempo of the fight scene exactly how you want it to go.
	+ The more detail you give the less the reader will use their imagination, the less you give the more they will use it.

**Develop a style.** There are dozens of different ways that you could write a good fight scene and each author needs to come up with one that works for their writing. Here are some ideas of fight styles to consider.

* + Realistic.
	+ Over the top fantasy.
	+ One on one.
	+ One on many.
	+ Epic scale (many on many).

**Show the effect of the fight once it is over.** After the fight, is your hero injured? Is he bleeding? Did he break an arm? If there were any, what about the other combatants? If your fighter walks away afterwards as though nothing has happened, then he is either a robot, or you are missing some detail.

Sample Gunfight Scene

Martinez cocked his pistol and walked into the abandoned warehouse. Well, almost abandoned. The one remaining life in there? He was the reason for the pistol.

Dust in the air. The smell of sweat. People had been here not long ago. That, or Martinez’s man stunk bad. He’d given a heck of a chase, so either was possible. They’d spent hours like that, tearing through the desert heat in cars, then on foot, and the warehouse’s roof provided a reprieve from the sun, if not the heat.

“Denny,” he shouted, his voice echoing across the tarped boxes and dusty desert air. “I know you’re in here.”

A single deafening roar from his man’s assault rifle punctuated his call like an exclamation point. A familiar, smug face came up from behind a box in the western corner. Though the sound had startled him, Martinez smiled as he pulled his sunglasses down and locked eyes with the target.

“Step out from behind the box,” he said. “Let me kill you quick.”

He tried his own exclamation point, but Denny ducked back behind his cover by the time Martinez had lifted his arm to fire. The 9mm pistol sounded weak following a rifle like that.

Another rifle shot. Martinez thought for a second he felt pain. He was sure it was just a stab in the gut from his nerves. Not, as he first imagined, a bullet.

“Cheap shots,” Martinez said, conveniently forgetting his own a few seconds prior. “I can play that.”

He waited for Denny’s head to surface as a flashbulb started to burst in his head. The box was wooden. He could shoot through the thing. He smiled again—this time at his own stupidity.

*pop pop pop*

The three rounds sent splinters flying and polluted the warehouse air with even more dust. The gunsmoke and sawdust irritated his lungs so badly he had to cough. The lack of a similar one from behind the box indicated at least one of the rounds had found Denny.

One step forward, then another. Nothing but silence from his man. He’d done it, he hoped. He was ready to cash the contract. Retire to the Caribbean and—

A final pop. Martinez was conscious up until the second he hit the floor. The rifle’s muzzle, poking almost invisibly from one of the hole’s he’d shot through the box, looked more like a smiling mouth to him than anything, even with the smoke coming out of it.

Sample Swordfight Scene

End of the line. One last stop. Though he’d heard it described as “underground,” Davis was loath to call the last round of the fight anything close to that since it took place on the roof of a building.

And what a roof it was. Packed with promoters, gamblers, fans of all types, the only man he found honorable of the whole bunch was his opponent, who stood at the edge opposite his own with his sword glinting in the late evening city sun.

This was crazy. He knew it. Crazy didn’t mean the two remaining swords on the roof—his, a broadsword and his opponent’s, a thin curved hookblade—hadn’t spilled a lot of blood that day. Both blades looked almost pink in the dying light. He made brief eye contact with his opponent, who only smirked at him. He didn’t want to admit the move gave his man the edge, but it had.

“GENTLEMEN.” The fat announcer man stepped between them. What Davis wouldn’t have given to open *his* belly, instead. “BEGIN.”

And they were off. The crowd shied back as the opponent, all youth and lean muscle, leapt catlike from the ledge, waving the hooked blade in figure eights multiple times before touching down on the roof again. Davis cracked a smile. This time, he made sure to make eye contact. For a brief moment, he could see uncertainty in his opponent’s eyes. He felt grateful for the advantage.

*Advancing. Advancing*. The man charged at him with the hooked blade upheld, going to his foreswing and following it with a backswing. Davis dodged the first and met the second with his broadsword. The weight of the thing sent his opponent’s blade back, back, back…but not far enough to knock the blade free of his hands.

*Striking.*This arcing shot sliced the fabric of Davis’s shirt at the midsection. It missed the flesh behind it by perhaps a centimeter.

His man staggered. Davis swung. His broadsword missed, though not close enough to eat fabric. The opponent managed another smirk, this time at the spryness of his dodge. Davis had to admit it was impressive, but this time, the sight only made him angrier.

*Swing. Swing. Swing.*The first two missed badly, but the third, a backswing off the one before it, found flesh. The heavy broadsword ate through his opponent as easily as air. The fighter dropped to a knee, tried to stand, and dropped again.

“A WINNER!” The fat man stepped towards the center again, making sure not to sully his expensive shoes with the loser’s blood. “CLAIM YOUR PRIZE. OR, THE BONUS!”

Davis looked at his man. The most honorable man there, yes, but the wound was bad enough to kill him. That, and Davis needed money. He raised his sword and smiled one last time, avoiding eye contact as he brought it down for the last strike of the tourney.

Sample Fistfight Scene

The first punch glanced Tyler’s chin. He noticed too late that it was a feint, though, when the second punch doubled him over and expelled the last bit of choked air from his beer-weighted belly.

It was a heck of a shot. Outside of having the wind knocked from him, which he always hated, Tyler noticed a fair amount of pain with the gutshot, which was something he wasn’t used to. A hit to the face, yes, or even the kidney...but the gut shouldn’t have been much more than discomfort, if that.

Fortunately, he was used to it all. A veteran of bar fights in four states and countless cities, even being out of air was something Tyler knew how to deal with.

He stood straight, eyes bulging with rage, and stared at his opponent—some punk college boy with a smart mouth—right in his shifty little eyes. The kid tried to stand tall, but he was about to pee his pants he was so scared. Tyler had him where he wanted him.

“You…little…” Tyler took a lurching step forward with each word. On the third, he swung: “*Punk*!”

The blow felt too sluggish. Tyler knew the second he launched it. The spry, smirking college kid ducked under it. Before Tyler could even register the dodge, however, another body shot, this one to his ribs, sent fresh ripples of pain through his torso. He didn’t fall—he made absolutely sure he *did not fall*—but it was a lot closer than he’d have liked. In other bars, where he was more well-known, his reputation would have already taken a beating whether he won the fight or not.

The kid went in for another shot. Tyler shoved him off. Seeing the kid scoot back so far against the weight of it gave him a second wind. He covered the distance between them. Threw three more punches that *did* land. The kid fell.

Then, he stood again.

It was unreal. Between the pain in his guts and ribs and the general confusion (some would call it being punch drunk), the sight of the kid on his feet after the patented Tyler left-right-left was not something he wanted to see. He threw a haymaker that the kid ducked but didn’t parry, then another that the kid swung under again—and responded in turn with an uppercut.

*Click*. The sound of Tyler’s upper and lower rows of teeth making unplanned contact sickened him. Still, he kept his feet. He had to. Falling down was not—

Tyler woke up in the ambulance with a bad ache—both in his head and his ego.

“Punk,” he said again, his throat sore from the effort of speaking that single word.

**Creating Fight Scenes and Battles**

**As well as hints on conflict, plot, and worldbuilding**

**Advice for those who write science fiction, fantasy, historical novels, and romance**

**by**

**Marilynn Byerly**

Love and battle scenes have far more in common than most of us realize. Both are the hardest moments in our novels to create convincingly, require that all the senses be used to create them, and the motivation and outcome are vitally important to the plot.

I won't belabor the commonality, but keep it in mind as you write your own fight scenes.

PLOTTING THE FIGHT SCENE

The fight scene should be put into the plot not only to liven up the action but also to move the plot forward. Figure out what is at stake for the viewpoint character and the other characters. Make the possible results of the fight, beyond dying, as dangerous as getting killed.

This is the beginning of a fight scene in [STAR-CROSSED](http://marilynnbyerly.com/page4.html). Kellen is being transported by two soldiers to his first owner and a life as a sex slave, and one decides to try him herself.

When she invaded his mouth, he heaved with nausea. For the first time, he understood the violation of rape. He fell backwards onto the floorboard with her on top of him. She weighed more than he did. Her hand slid into his pants.

As she touched him, he realized that it would be die or escape. No middle ground of surviving in the harem was acceptable to him. He hit her then, a killing blow to the throat. She gurgled and arced like a woman in orgasm and went limp.

For Kellen, at this moment, death is preferable to what is in store for him, and escape or death are his only options, and the reader knows this, too.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY ABOUT YOUR VIEWPOINT CHARACTER AND OTHER CHARACTERS?

The fight should offer at least one or two pieces of the viewpoint character's emotional puzzle to the reader. It should also say something about other characters, including the other fighter or fighters.

In this scene from [THE ONCE AND FUTURE QUEEN,](http://marilynnbyerly.com/page5.html) I wanted to show Val's skill at stopping a fight, not in winning one. He's facing his rival for the Queen in an exhibition match that quickly turns real. Prince Gregory also shows his true nature in this fight.

During the first blows, Val concentrated on his defense and let his muscles settle into the rhythm of swordplay. He hadn't been completely honest with Gregory. He'd practiced with a sword in the last years under his personal guard's supervision, but he hadn't really fought Wajda, a Galaxy-class fighter with most weapons, who didn't relish murdering his commander in an unfair fight. He'd gotten much better as time passed, but he didn't think he'd ever surpass a weapon like Wajda.

After several minutes of attempting to get past Val's defenses, Gregory lost his temper and began to batter at him as if to pound him into the ground. The Prince had expected a quick defeat and easy humiliation, not an equal opponent, and his simmering anger about Fira now boiled.

Val began to fight for his life. Gregory wouldn't be content with pretend wounds and victory; he was out for blood.

The crowd, who had chattered and cheered their local favorite, became completely silent, and the air rang with the tintinnabulation of the singing blades and the hoarse rasp of both fighters' breathes.

Val thought desperately for a way out of the mess. He wasn't a Galaxy-class fighter, but he was a superior survivor and a commander of men.

Gregory's weapon slipped past his defenses and slashed toward his throat. Val dodged, laughing as if having a marvelous time. He praised loudly, "A wonderful strategy."

When Gregory slashed backhanded in a return blow, Val thrust his blade vertically and caught it before it cut him in half. "Excellent. Excellent. You're one of the finest swordsmen I've ever seen."

Gregory blinked as if coming out of a daze but continued to go for blood.

Val laughed and spouted praise for almost a minute before the Prince's attack began to ease in its brutality. Their weapons caught each other high in the air, and they stood belly to belly, face to face.

Gregory whispered, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Dying is a messy, bloody, ugly thing. I don't want to kill you in front of Fira, and I don't particularly want to die in front of her either. Where I come from that's not acceptable. If we must fight, we do it without a female audience."

The boy glanced toward Fira who stood white and silent, her hands clinched in painful distress. "I had forgotten...." He danced away, bringing his sword forward. "Another time then."

DOES ANY CHARACTER OR DEMON/MONSTER HAVE SPECIAL ABILITIES? WHAT ARE THEY?

List the special abilities of the viewpoint character then give his opponent a skill or weapon that is equal to or slightly better than his. Equal powers make interesting contests. Your hero's special abilities or skills should have been set up long before this fight scene.

MAPPING OUT THE FIGHT

With these things in mind, you can map out the coming fight. Remember that the hero must barely survive each kind of attack, and he must start running out of options. Especially in the final showdown, the hero must be forced to go beyond his abilities and must face some element of his ultimate fear. He must do what he considers unthinkable or impossible to win.

In an unpublished novel, I had a hero who must face a were-dragon. This was the climatic fight between the two characters, winner take everything. The hero, who wants to die because his life will be a living hell, must survive for the sake of the woman he loves because her life is at stake as well.

I wanted him to face his weakness and fear of living as well as his own tendency to care more about himself than anyone else.

Since this is the climax of the novel, I wanted the fight to extend over several chapters, and I didn't want it to be boring and repetitive.

First, I thought about the weapons of a dragon -- claws, teeth, fire, size, and wings. Considering the dragon's many weapons and ways to fight, I realized that I could divide the fight into three acts.

The first act is ground-fought and must involve fire. The dragon will also use his human intelligence and voice as an emotional weapon.

The hero is tentative in his skill, and he's distanced himself from fights before so his weapon is a lance. He has a magical shield and armor which will help against the flame, but he can't survive the flame for long, and the dragon is creating a conflagration with the vegetation. The hero's uncertainty is also used against him by the dragon with his taunts until the hero acknowledges his feelings for his lover, and this allows her to bring magical rain.

In the second act, the dragon has lost his fire because of the heavy downpour which has soaked the terrain as well as dousing his flame so he takes flight, and the two battle.

I thought about flying warfare and the different ways a dragon can use his weapons in flight. I decided that the dragon would strafe the hero by using his claws to attack, and his wind in flight would be so strong the hero could barely stand to face it. The dragon would also use his weight to knock the hero down. After the initial fighting where the dragon uses these methods of attack, he manages to get the hero's shield which he's used against the claws and proceeds to shred him at each pass and exhaust him because of the heavy wind created by his wings. Barely staying on his feet because of exhaustion and blood loss, the hero finally retaliates by using the lance like a spear and throws it into the dragon's underbelly.

In the third act, the dragon can no longer fly because of damaged wings from the lance so he and the hero are forced to face each other in close quarters with no retreat. The hero uses a sword.

The hero now knows his own heart and has discovered his courage. He will no longer give up the fight. The dragon has discovered that he can die in this fight, and he's afraid for the first time, but he's forced to stay because the two are locked in a mythic pattern which neither can escape.

Since the battle is in close quarters, I thought about the dragon's different weapons, and the hero's battle plan. The hero must get close enough to stab into the dragon's heart, but the dragon uses his long neck, his size, and his speed to stay safe. The hero finally uses a distraction to shift the dragon's attention and stabs him.

CREATING THE CHARACTERS' PHYSICAL ACTIONS

For physical battles like sword fights, I visualize the fight and choreograph each character's moves. I often get up from the computer and pretend I'm holding a sword, imagine the opponent's move, and block it noting my balance, what I'm leaving open, and possible return blow.

I also use the physical location of the hero to vary fighting. The floor may be bloody from his first opponent so the hero or villain may slip and fail to parry a blow, etc.

I rarely write out blow for blow because I think that's boring. Instead, I'll give occasional overviews of what's happening. For example, the hero is thinking about how his body is learning the rhythm of the fight, or he's aware of other fighters around him.

I try to avoid using technical terms to describe the fight because I'm writing as much for those unfamiliar with swordplay as those who are, but I try to be accurate about how to use the weapon, and I use a sprinkling of correct terminology to make it seem more realistic.

I've never fought with a sword, but I've held a number in my hand, and I've watched others fight with them. I try to remember the weight of the weapon, the sound a fighter makes as he swings the heavy sword, and the sheer weariness of the weight of fighting something or someone above you.

REAL FIGHTING VERSUS MEDIA FIGHTING

Remember that the fighting you see on TV and in the movies is rarely realistic. People really can't fly through the air as they do in XENA and the latest martial arts film. Even stage fighting in plays is different from real fighting with a weapon.

Base your fights on the real world, not on media fights if you want it to be realistic. When you are researching an historical fighting style or a particular weapon fighting method, be sure to search for visual information as well as technical information. If you have an expert to help you, ask him if he can recommend a movie or video that is accurate.

Also, remember that fighting is physically and emotionally exhausting and have your characters act accordingly. Fighting will cause an incredible adrenaline rush, then the fighter will crash when that adrenaline gives out, and if he must continue fighting, he will be more careless of his safety.

If the combatant is injured, he can't be perfectly fine in the next scene unless you have one heck of a wizard along for the quest, or the starship has a first-rate sick bay.

CREATING THE EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

The viewpoint character's emotions and senses must be at much at play in the struggle as his body and weapons. I make a special effort to include all the senses in my descriptions. What does he hear? See? Smell? Taste? Feel?

How do he react to killing someone? The death of a friend?

Adding emotion isn't an either/or situation. It's just as vital to add emotional layers to the physical action as it is to have brief moments of introspection when the battle isn't going on.

Characterization also isn't just introspection. It's characters interacting with each other and revealing themselves in bits and pieces.

Your band of adventurers may not sit around "sharing their feelings" in touchie-feelie moments like a Dr. Phil show, but they've been around each other enough to know that one hates the bad guys because they murdered his wife and kids, and he's liable to attack without thought and ruin their surprise attack.

He may be clutching the sword at his side, his other hand opening and closing in nervous energy, and another adventurer may warn him to relax and may mention the wife and kiddies.

The image of his wife's raped and brutalized body could flash through his mind, and he fights his raw anger and lust to kill. That won't slow the action down like having a long interior flashback of him finding his family's bodies, and his vow of revenge. Instead, it adds to the excitement of the coming action because the reader now questions whether this guy will lose his cool and get everyone killed.

An even better way to present this information is to put it in an earlier scene that isn't action intensive so the reader will know the details and will only need a slight reminder of this character's motivation and tendency to attack without thought.

After some rewriting, if you still aren't happy with the emotional content of your story, you may want to look at the central story idea. Do your characters have a real emotional reason to be doing what they are doing?

Their hunt for the lost treasure should be as much about their emotional reason for needing the treasure as it is about simple greed. That emotional reason should be important enough to make the reader want them to succeed as much as they do.

Maybe the main character is after a magical sword which is the only weapon which will kill the dragon currently ravaging his homeland, and he doesn't really care about other treasure and the life of drunken decadence and dancing girls it promises the other characters.

Maybe the other characters have laughed at him, but they've admired him and gradually they have been drawn into his quest for the sword, and in the end, they'll choose to get the sword with him and lose the other treasure.

Maybe the one who laughed the hardest and made the main character's life hell along the journey will be the one to sacrifice himself so that the hero can rescue a homeland the scoffer has never had, but now wishes to have with his whole heart.

I always use Ben Bova's character/plot questions when I'm creating a plot so that the emotional investment of my characters is always present in the action. I discuss this method in my article on using [index cards to plot a novel](http://marilynnbyerly.com/page9a.html) if you'd like to learn more.

PACE AND CHARACTERIZATION

Action/adventure doesn't preclude emotion, and it can't be all hack and slash all the time.

Years ago, when the INDIANA JONES movies were so wildly popular, a publisher created an action book series with the pace of the opening scene of the original IJ where disaster builds upon disaster upon disaster with no real stopping for breath. I read the first book, and it was bloody awful because the action became boring and silly at such a lunatic pace, and there was so little emotional element to the main character or any of the other characters I didn't give a damn one way or the other what happened.

EXAMPLE: A bear chases the hero up a tree, he thinks the tree is safe, but it's rotten, and the bear begins to shove it over, the tree lands in the river, but it's infested with alligators, and there are bad guys on the other side of the river, and a bear on this side. He out swims the gators to a bridge and begins to climb up a vine growing up its side, but, ooops, there's a large poisonous snake right above him, and....

Needless to say, that series vanished without a trace after a few books.

Pace isn’t just violent act after violent act, or the characters moving from one place to another. It’s mixing characterization and elements that move the emotional and action plot forward. It’s giving the reader continual questions about the characters and what’s happening and answering a few of those questions as you move along.

It’s having a quiet moment of introspection or a brief comic moment in the heat of a long battle that reminds the reader why they’re reading the story or why they like these characters.

ROMANCE, SEX, AND PACE

Love, romance, and sex have always had a place in action/adventure, fantasy, and science fiction, but, today, the woman usually fights beside the man.

Used with care and thought, love, romance, and sex can add dimension to the characterization, plot, and pace. Unfortunately, care often isn’t used, and the pace and plot are ruined because of it.

Recently, I read a novel about a romantic couple fighting demons. Most of the time, they were so busy fantasizing about the other’s crotch that I wondered at the brains and survival skills of these people. A fighter who is busy thinking about sex before and during a fight is a dead fighter.

The pace was also ruined because the constant sexual elements and sexual introspection distracted from the plot and the peril.

Brief bits of body language--a touch, a smile, or caress, as well as brief snippets of romantic dialogue can keep the sexual tension and caring evident without bringing the story to a dead halt.

In a lull in the fighting at a safe moment, put your couple in camp with a good friend walking patrol away from them, and let them at each other. Or find them a safe hiding place where they can repair their wounds and chase each other around the sleeping bag if they want to.

SWORD FIGHTING THE CORRECT WAY

For more information about sword fighting, there are a number of excellent books, websites, and movies on the subject. Just be sure you pick the right style of fighting for the period if you are writing historically.

If you know anyone in your local Society for Creative Anachronisms (SCA) contact them, and they can probably put you in touch with an expert in whatever weapon or period you choose. If you don't know anyone in the SCA, visit the sf group at the nearest college because many of them are also involved with the SCA. I'm sure there's also contact information online for most local SCAs.

FIST FIGHTS

My advice for creating a fist fight is essentially the same as I offer for a sword fight.

Remember that, like sword fighting, fist fighting styles have changed over the centuries. Fighting terms have changed as well. Be sure not to have your Viking warrior "boxing," for example.

Another common mistake I've seen is to have martial arts moves as part of a fight during periods when the combatants would have had no chance to have learned moves that are radically different from Western-style fighting.

If you want to read someone who writes authentic fist fights, read one of Louis L'Amour's Westerns. As a former boxer, he got it right. From my perspective, he also made the fights overlong with too many details. Unless you are writing for an audience who wants long, detailed fights, you shouldn't copy him in that sense.

GUNS AND RIFLES

I'm far more comfortable with a pistol or rifle than I will ever be with a sword, and I was trained by an expert, but I still take great care to get my information correct when I have a character with one in his hand.

Whatever you do, don't casually throw out brand names of guns or styles of guns if you don't know what you are talking about because you'll almost always be wrong. Find an expert to check what you've written or do careful research.

WEAPONS OF THE FUTURE

There are two great dangers in creating weapons for your novel set in the future.

One is too much explanation. Think of a Western or present-day story you’ve read. Did the character pull out his gun and think about the dynamics of how a bullet is fired, or did he just pull the dang trigger? Do the same with future weapons. Just pull the dang trigger.

Two is media influence. A phaser is STAR TREK terminology, an energy weapon is a generic term. Always use a generic or made-up term for technology. Using trademarked technology terms will get you in legal trouble, and readers who know the difference between a phaser and energy weapon will toss away your book when they see you make such an elementary mistake.

THE WOMAN AS WARRIOR

Xena and her movie and TV sisters have a lot to answer for in action/adventure. Some writers see these women as realistic female fighters, and they aren’t even remotely realistic either as women or human beings in fighting methods, stamina, and strength.

Maybe your warrior princess or action babe in leather and over-priced stilettos is as tough as any man, but she will have certain physical limitations. Use those limitations to be creative in fight scenes.

The strongest woman is rarely as strong as the strongest man, but she may be faster, smarter, or more supple, or she may be trained in combat when he isn’t. Use her realistic strengths rather than using unrealistic strengths.

Many women and some men are pragmatists as well. The rule that both parties must use the same weapons for the fight to be “fair” has nothing to do reality, and pragmatists know this. If a huge man with a knife charges toward your action babe, she should shoot him and not feel bad about it later.

Years ago, I had a long chat with a world-class weapons and combat expert about fighting. I asked him who was the most dangerous opponent in a fight.

His answer-- “In a bar fight most men will keep fighting until they go down. Later, they’ll get up, and we might have a beer together. A small man doesn’t do that.

“To him, it’s not a fight, it’s survival. He’s fighting to kill because he knows he might not survive otherwise. If he goes down, he doesn’t stay down. He comes right back up and keeps fighting until he takes you down.

“He’ll use any weapon he can find to kill you, too.

“Never pick a fight with a small man.”

Think of that attitude when you write a woman fighter.

HORSES AND COMBAT

Having your characters on horseback adds a totally different dimension to the fight. The horse is a living, thinking part of the combat, and it can also be used as a weapon under the right circumstances. The horse and rider are a team, not a human with a means of transportation.

If you aren't a rider, I suggest you avoid horseback fighting because it's hard to understand a horse's movement and nature during combat without experience.

If the combat is necessary, talk to a horseman and have him check out your scene for accuracy.

An important thing to keep in mind is that most people love horses, and some readers can become really upset if there are horse casualties, and you'll lose a fan. Wipe out all the adult humans you want, but think twice and thrice before killing a horse, a pet, a cute fantasy dragonette, or a child.

This advice especially holds true in romance. Readers of fantasy and science fiction tend to be less softhearted about the livestock and noncombatants because such death is more common in these genre.

MURDERERS AND METHODS

The type of fight and the type of characters control all elements of a fight or a killing.

A professional killer will handle a murder very differently from an amateur murderer or someone who pulls out a knife during a heated argument.

The killing will also be different according to the victim's abilities in self-defense, their weapon or lack of weapon, the amount of surprise in the attack, etc., etc.

The way the knife is used can tell a great deal about the killer. Did he put the knife into the heart without hitting a rib? Did he grab the victim from behind in a certain way and hit the artery in the throat for a quick kill? Was his killing method distinctive enough to mark him as a pro or someone trained in a certain style of military skills? Was his knife unusual or a standard hunting knife used by most local hunters? Was it sharp and well-maintained, or did it bruise and tear because it was dull?

A murder or killing should be as distinctive as the victim and the murder, and all elements of their personality, weapons skills, and location will determine the type of murder.

THE DEATH OF A MINOR CHARACTER

Every once and a while, a minor character must die. Often, they give their lives so you can show the reader the danger the main characters face.

A good point to remember is one Stephen King recommends. First you create a real person and make the reader care, then you massacre him. Two examples --

STORY A: A man is walking through the darkness, and the monster eats him.

OR

STORY B: Fred is walking to the 7-11 at midnight because his beloved pregnant wife is craving pickles and ice cream, and she ate the last gherkin at supper. A monster jumps out and kills poor Fred.

Story B makes the act and the monster more horrific.

THE NONCOMBATANT'S VIEWPOINT

Sometimes, I describe the scene from another character's viewpoint, but I only do this when the viewpoint character's reaction is more important than the fighter's.

In TIME AFTER TIME, Justin is recreating the final battle between one of his past reincarnations and their nemesis to try to make Alexa remember her own past lives. Watching him risk himself, Alexa begins to acknowledge how much he is beginning to mean to her.

With shields covering their left sides and swords drawn, both men circled then began to whack at each other. Justin lifted his shield and caught a blow then pounded into Rufus' shield with his own sword. Rufus smashed at Justin again. The clashing of metal shook the valley.

Alexa bit her finger and stared. Both men knew what they were about, but the fighting seemed to require little of the finesse of fencing and only mild strategy. The main skill seemed to be the strength of the blows and the endurance of the swordsmen.

Justin jumped, dodging a blow to his legs, then smashed Rufus across the chest with his shield. He swung with his sword.

Rufus retreated then attacked again.

After many long minutes of fighting, Alexa recognized more of the strategy involved in the fighting. Both men were obviously careful not to injure the other with the two-edged swords, but she still couldn't enjoy the contest. She'd enjoy giving Justin a good piece of her mind when this was over.

Justin swung toward Rufus, who turned to receive the blow with his shield. Rufus overcompensated balance and fell forward, his sword thrusting toward Justin's chest.

THE SPACE BATTLE

A good point to remember is that fiction is intimate. In film, a huge space battle makes good viewing and is exciting. Putting that same battle on the page is usually boring. A ship blows up here, a ship blows up there. Ooops, there goes a battle cruiser. Yawn.

But even in film and TV science fiction, battle scenes keep their main emphasis on the central characters as the battle surges around them. Think of the final battle between the Dominion and the Federation in the final episode of STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE.

Yes, ships were blowing up everywhere, but the viewer followed the characters and their fates. The destruction of Cardassia Prime is seen primarily through the eyes of Garak and a few other Cardassians. The Dominion's slaughter of the civilians is shown by the murder of Garak's grandmotherly housekeeper.

The attack on the Death Star in the original STAR WARS also emphasizes the individuals over the exploding ships.

In that same sense, a writer should show the destruction from a character's viewpoint. From Captain Kane's viewpoint, it's not just ships being blown up, it's people he knows and has worked with. A former first officer might be commanding the ship that blows up in front of him.

Or, if you're using multiple viewpoints, go to the viewpoint of a character the reader cares about and have him experience the shaking deck, twisting metal, then nothingness.

The most important point to remember when writing a battle scene is that even the greatest battle is about individuals, and the best individuals in fiction are those the reader cares about.

THE GROUND BATTLE OF ARMIES

Reread the section on space battles and substitute army or host or whatever for spaceships.

THE SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF A WIZARD'S DUEL

When I think of a wizard's duel, I think of the Disney movie, THE SWORD IN THE STONE, where Merlin and Mim are taking turns throwing spells at each other and themselves. If one becomes an elephant, the other becomes a mouse which frightens the elephant, or they change the other into a mouse so they can become a cat.

Or the duel between the Death Eaters and the good wizards in HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX where the wands are used almost as swords to parry and thrust spells and counter spells.

Or the final confrontation between the hero and heroine and the dark powers in Andre Norton's WITCHWORLD fantasy novels where the viewpoint character's emotions are more clear than what is actually happening from a magical perspective, and the fight is more about emotional strength than magical spells.

The trick in creating a wizard's duel without pushing it into a caricature of those I mention above is to personalize the duel. It's not the spells that are important, but the characters themselves. At the same time, you have to give better detail than the Norton novels' duels which often made me scratch my head and reread them several times before I figured out exactly what has happened.

If you keep true to your characters, their powers, and the unique world you have created, you should be able to avoid most of the cliches and create a duel worthy of your characters and your readers.

WEREWOLVES, VAMPIRES, AND OTHER CREATURES

Werewolves, vampires, and other supernatural beings are becoming a staple in current genre fiction. One problem I've seen in many of the fight scenes involving these creatures is created by a flaw in worldbuilding.

Consider this scene from a contemporary novel: The vampire protagonist is in a dangerous part of a major city, and he's attacked by a large pack of demon-possessed humans. He fights them off until some of his vampire friends arrive, and all the demon-possessed humans are murdered. Fortunately, no normal humans saw the fight so the vampires' existence remains a secret.

What's the problem? Simple. How can a race remain a secret for long with widespread killings and the sheer number of combatants on both sides? Wouldn't the police become a tad suspicious if the murders kept building up? Wouldn't a medical examiner suggest that someone with superhuman strength ripped these guys apart? And what about that weird DNA found on the ripped throat of one of the victims?

The fight itself can be perfectly choreographed and written, but at its end, when all the bodies are lying there, and the vampires are leaving the scene, some readers will go, "Wait a minute. What about the police? What about...." If you leave that kind of question, the fight scene has failed.

In a recent urban fantasy novel, the human-shaped demons spent the novel taking human prey while the vampires were killing the demons and the vampire hunters were killing the vampires, yet the humans and the police were apparently totally clueless about the existence of any of these creatures and unconcerned at a body count that fit a war zone, not an American city.

For a race like vampires or werewolves to remain secret, they must have very small numbers, a large number of anything can't be kept secret, or the race rarely makes contact with humans.

If they take prey, they must dispose of the bodies so no evidence of the death will ever be found. Their prey must also be on the edges of human society so that their loss won't be obvious. In other words, vampires should attack a homeless person, not the beautiful young Countess surrounded by friends, retainers, and family.

Vampires definitely shouldn't attack tourists in a town which supports itself with tourism. Considering the incredible national coverage and outrage caused by just a few tourist deaths in places like Miami and New Orleans in recent years, it's highly unlikely that dozens of tourists becoming monster chow wouldn't cause a similar outcry and intense scrutiny.

Real world logic applies even to supernatural characters. Make the fight and its outcome logical, or you've failed.

MAGIC AND REALITY

If you are writing fantasy, you can do things that won't work in the real world. A person can levitate or fly, change shape and mass, or anything else as long as you stay within the rules you've created for that fantasy world.

However, some real world rules apply. Magic use should take a physical toll on the human wizard since it uses physical and mental energy. You can decide just how much energy is needed in your world, but you'll have to make sure your user has to eat and rest at a certain point.

Many recent novels with vampires, werewolves, and other creatures have presented these creatures as real, not magic. They are genetic mutations, or victims of a virus, or something like that.

If your creatures are real, not magic, then you have to think carefully about their special abilities, their energy requirements, etc., because you can no longer get away with saying that it's magic and doesn't have to make sense.

SHAPESHIFTERS AND MASS

One such problem you might need to consider is the physical logistics of shapeshifters. If a man can change into a mouse and back to a man, can the mouse weight less than a pound and a man weight much more?

In a magical fantasy, that is acceptable since magic by its nature defies the laws of nature and physics, but if you've created a real race of werewolves that exist in this world with its natural laws, you can't make the weight go away and come back.

According to the laws of physics, mass can be lost, but it can't be regained in a closed system. If a man turns into a wolf, the wolf will weigh just a little less than the man weighed because some of the weight was burned off as the energy needed to make the physical change. Think of it as the energy equivalent of running a marathon. To change back into the man, even more energy would be burned.

The question of mass makes for interesting possibilities in a story. In my short story, "[The Werewolf Whisperer](http://marilynnbyerly.com/page9f.html)," the protagonist is trapped in wolf form in an animal shelter. The only way out of the shelter requires his being neutered. The change from wolf to man heals most injuries, but it can't replace lost mass. If he's neutered as a wolf, he will be neutered as a human as well. My protagonist definitely doesn't want that to happen so he must find another way out of the shelter.

Here's other interesting questions to consider in your stories. If mass is burned in the change, and the wolf or man is totally lean with nothing in his stomach, where will the burned mass come from? Doesn't that mean that somehow the wolf must have a full stomach before the change comes, or he could die of starvation, be very weak, or be crippled somehow?

If a man changes into a dragon, how big will his wings have to be to handle an adult human male's weight?

As I said, interesting possibilities. Logical worldbuilding offers more interesting possibilities than sloppy worldbuilding ever will. Take the extra effort to think out all aspects of your creatures' existence, and you'll have a better story.

THE FINAL CONFRONTATION

The final meeting between the hero and his opponent must be more intense than any other battle before, and to be the winner, the hero must risk everything and lose something of inestimable value in order to win. It is not only a physical battle, but an emotional one as well.

The hero's special skill here should make the story stronger, not make the hero invincible. Think of Superman, Kryptonite, and the danger of invincibility to a story. Here's two story final confrontations --

STORY A: Several world leaders are held hostage by Lex Luthor who has tied them to Kryptonite poles. Though weak, Superman manages to rescue them and gets far enough away from the Kryptonite to regain his strength to defeat Luthor.

OR

STORY B: Several world leaders are held hostage by Lex Luthor who has tied them to Kryptonite poles. They are surrounded by cameras so the whole world watches.

Luthor wants Clark Kent to act as hostage negotiator, and if anyone else including Superman comes near them, an explosion will kill both leaders. Clark approaches but sees the Kryptonite in the poles. If he goes forward and becomes weak, Luthor and the world will know he's Superman. If he backs away, Luthor will kill them immediately.

Here's his dilemma -- save two important leaders or lose his identity as Clark Kent. But Clark Kent is more than a role, it's his humanity. Clark belongs to Earth and fellow humans, and he has a relationship with them. They see him as an equal. Superman, however, is a superior alien who can never have an equal relationship with humans who see his powers and are afraid or uncomfortable. If he is no longer Clark, he will be totally alone.

Losing his identity as Clark Kent is his greatest emotional fear. What should he do?

Which story is stronger and more interesting? I'm sure you'll say the second one because more than physical danger is involved. Clark/Superman must risk something of great emotional importance to win, and by winning, he will ultimately lose.

Find the main character's greatest emotional weakness and hit him there with your plot in the same way as you hit him with his physical weakness.

LOVE OR WAR?

War is hell, and so is love, but they make one heck of a good story if you get both right.