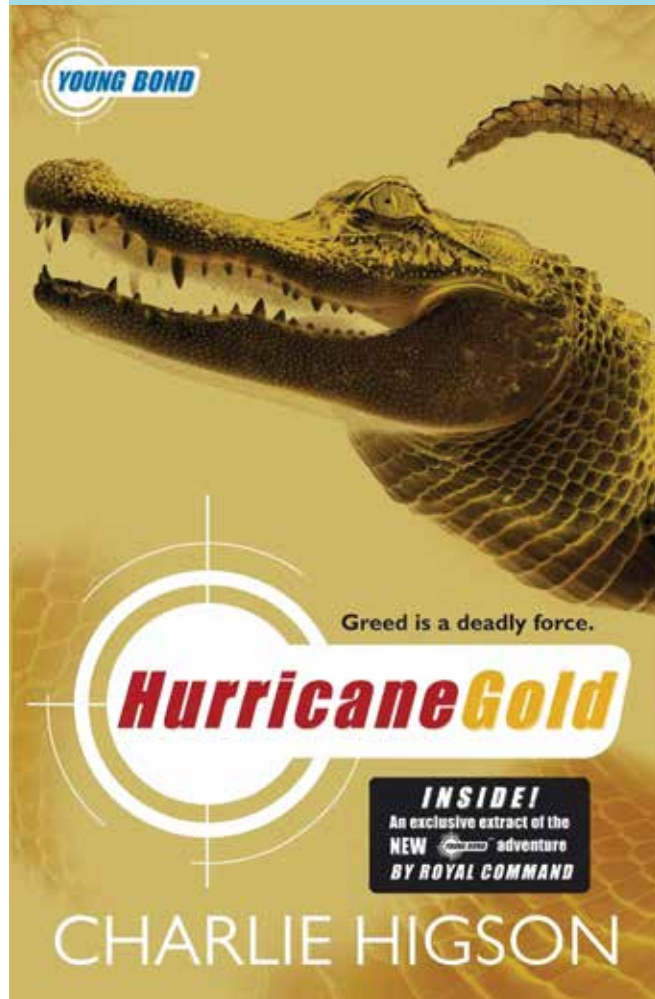


3 Pace and threat

Learning objective

- Understand how writers use verb choice and paragraphing to create a sense of pace and threat



Pace and threat are two of the key elements of a successful spy story. The hero is constantly placed in dangerous and threatening situations – and often, as soon as they escape from one dangerous and threatening situation, they find themselves in another! Writers use this high level of pace and threat to hold the reader's attention.

Activity 1

Read the extract below, taken from the fourth novel in the Young Bond series, *Hurricane Gold*.

Young James Bond is visiting Jack Stone's house in Mexico with his aunt. Gangsters have broken into the house to steal Stone's gold. The gangsters are pressurising his children, Precious and JJ, to tell them where the gold is hidden but a tropical storm is on its way...

James watched as the young man waved his gun at Precious and JJ.

'Where's your father?' he yelled. 'Tell me or I'll hurt you.'

'He's not here,' wailed Precious. 'He's flown down south. He won't be back until after the storm.'

As Precious said the word 'storm' three things happened at once. There was a terrific crack of thunder, the whole house shook and the lights went out.

The storm had finally arrived.

Precious screamed. The young man snarled at her to shut up. There was just enough light coming through the window for James to see him grab the two children and drag them out of the room.

James stayed put, breathing heavily. The intruders seemed to have come prepared, but with luck they wouldn't know that he was here at all.

James waited in the Wendy house for a full five minutes. Once he was sure that the man wasn't coming back he crept out of his hiding place and tiptoed over to the playroom door.

He hardly needed to be quiet. The storm was making a fearsome racket as it buffeted the house. There was a cacophony of different sounds; crashing, hissing, roaring, squealing, rumbling.

As he moved out into the corridor James felt the full force of the wind slam into the house like a physical object. He could actually feel the floor moving beneath his feet, and the walls seemed to sway and shudder. He glanced out of the window, but all he could see was a swirling maelstrom of cloud and rain. There was a startling flash and another blast of thunder, then a gust of wind so powerful it blew the windows in. The rain followed, hosing down the corridor in horizontal bars. The walls were instantly soaked and a picture flew off the wall.



The noise from outside was like nothing that James had ever heard before, like boulders crashing down a mountainside. The wind was whipping around in the corridor and the house was vibrating as if at any moment it might crack up and be blown away.

James dropped to his knees and crawled along the sodden carpet as bits of debris were hurled past his head.

He reached the stairs and slid down them on his backside in the darkness. He made it safely to the lower landing and peered out between the banisters into the hallway below.

The servants were being rounded up and herded into the dining room by two of the men. The raid had been planned like a military operation.

James was the only person who might be able to get out and go for help.

1 In this extract, James, Precious and JJ face two different threats at the same time. What are they?

2 What impressions do you get of these two different threats?

- a Write down two or three words or phrases to describe each of these two threats.
- b Try to identify *how* the writer has given you these impressions.

3 Look at the final sentence of the extract.

James was the only person who might be able to get out and go for help.

What does this suggest about:

- a the character of James Bond?
- b the role of the hero in spy stories?

WRITER'S WORKSHOP: Creating a sense of pace and threat

How can I choose language to create a sense of threat?

Writers can create a sense of threat through the details they choose to describe, but they can increase the sense of threat through the language they use to describe those details.

Look at the **verbs** the writer has used to describe what one of the gangsters says and does:

‘Where’s your father?’ he **yelled**.
‘Tell me or I’ll hurt you.’

Precious screamed. The young man **snarled** at her to shut up. There was just enough light coming through the window for James to see him **grab** the two children and **drag** them out of the room.

Now look at the **verbs** the writer has chosen to describe the impact of the storm:

James felt the full force of the wind **slam** into the house like a physical object. He could actually feel the floor moving beneath his feet, and the walls seemed to **sway** and **shudder**.

How effective are these verbs? Try replacing each one with a new verb to add to the sense of threat. For example, what is the effect of changing:

‘Where’s your father?’ he yelled. to ‘Where’s your father?’ he moaned.

or ‘Where’s your father?’ he asked.

How can I use paragraphs to create pace in my narrative?

There are four reasons to start a new paragraph in your writing:

- when you change the subject or focus of your story
- when you change to a new setting
- when you change to a new time
- when a different character begins speaking.

However, writers often ignore these rules when they want to create a sense of pace. In the Young Bond extract, the writer has used lots of short paragraphs as he quickly moves his focus from the gangsters to the storm to James Bond’s movements through the house.

Look at the shortest paragraph in the extract: **The storm had finally arrived.**

The writer has isolated this sentence in its own, very short paragraph to give this moment more dramatic impact and heighten the threat of the storm. Are there any other sentences in the extract that would make an effective short paragraph?

Activity 2

- 1 Look again at the story you planned in Activity 5 on page 5. Choose a section of your story where you think you could create a sense of pace and threat to hold the reader’s attention. It could be:

 - your hero is being threatened by a villain or villains, like the gangsters in the Young Bond extract
 - your hero is being threatened by a difficult or dangerous situation, like the storm in the Young Bond extract
 - something else.
- 2 a Make a list of verbs you could use to emphasise the threat in your story. The verbs could describe the way a character speaks, the way a character acts, the situation your hero is in, etc.

b When making this list, you could think about some of the verbs used in the texts you have read so far in this unit.

yelled

running

lunge

shudder

skittering

snarled

thundering

slam

eluded

shivering

grab

slipped

sway

burned

sprayed
- 3 Write a short extract from this part of your story. Aim to write five to ten sentences using the verbs you have thought of in appropriate places to suggest danger, action or pace.

What do better writers do?

Better writers:

- are very aware of the effect they want to have on their reader
- choose vocabulary such as verbs very carefully to achieve this effect
- vary the lengths of their paragraphs, using longer paragraphs to convey information, and shorter paragraphs for dramatic impact.

CHECK YOUR WRITING

➡ Look back at your writing from Activity 2. Annotate your extract to explain some of the decisions you have made. It might look something like this:

He hurtled through the trees, the jungle just a blur of green. **He** could hear **them**, hear **their** angry shouts as **they smashed** through the dense undergrowth just metres behind him.

And then silence.

⌚ Which column best describes your use of paragraphing and verb choice?

- pronouns and determiners make reader wonder who these people are and what is going on
- verb choices create a sense of movement and pace
- short, one-sentence paragraph suggests a sudden, unexpected change

Level 4	Level 5	Level 6
I used some paragraphs to organise my main ideas.	I used paragraphs throughout and had some success with creating a sense of pace with my paragraphs.	I used paragraphs clearly and effectively throughout to give my story a sense of pace.
I chose some verbs deliberately, but some verb choices did not contribute to the sense of threat.	Most of my verb choices were deliberate and contributed to the sense of threat.	I chose all of my verbs carefully and deliberately to create a sense of pace and threat.