

FIGHT SCENE CHEAT SHEET

Fight scenes can be **gritty and realistic**, or **supernatural and fantastic**. Which route you choose will depend on your characters, settings, and the overall tone of your story.

Fight Scenes Serve 3 Functions:

- 1. Improve Pacing
- 2. Heap Trouble on Characters
- 3. Reader Satisfaction

What’s the purpose of the fight scene?

- Will it move the story forward?
- Will it reveal something about the character(s)?
- Will it set up later events?
- Or, is this the climactic scene in your novel?

4 Things Every Fight Scene Needs:

- 1. A cause
- 2. An opening salvo
- 3. An ebb and flow
- 4. A big finish

(And remember the “after-action report”!)

Setting It Up:

- 1. High Stakes
- 2. Real Danger
- 3. An Emotional Wound

Remember, motives make the difference between senseless violence and heroism.

Learn the vocabulary of martial movement. Do your research!

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE

Real violence is not even remotely similar to how it is depicted in film and television. Believe it or not, violence follows rules, both social and physical. As a writer, you should know what these rules are so you can know whether or not you want to break them.

The 3 Types of Physical Conflict:

- 1. Social aggression
 - 2. Asocial violence
 - 3. Waging war
- (#2 & #3 = *Pros... and pros don’t screw around*)

Pre-Attack Indicators:

- 1. Clenched jaw
- 2. Clenching fists
- 3. Grooming
- 4. Blading the body
- 5. Looking away/head turn
- 6. Posturing (“bowing up”)
- 7. Eyes glaze over
- 8. Nostrils flare
- 9. Sweating
- 10. Eyes widen/Pupils dilate
- 11. Initial contact (poking, prodding, and shoving)
- 12. Animated movements
- 13. Pacing
- 14. Scanning the area
- 15. Repeatedly glancing at targets

The Immutable Laws of Real-Life Combat:

- 1. **DISTANCE:** Proximity negates skill.
- 2. **SIZE and NUMBERS:** They matter, a lot!
- 3. **SPEED:** Get there first with the most.
- 4. **TIMING:** Intercept and don’t get hit.
- 5. **ATTRITION:** Getting hit has consequences.
- 6. **SKILL:** Skill differentials count.
- 7. **POSITIONING:** Action beats inaction.
- 8. **INTEL:** Know your enemy.
- 9. **STRATEGY:** Strategy prevents stalemates.
- 10. **WILL:** Ferocity matters.

Rules matter because they create **consistency**, increase **believability**, and provide a **rationale** for fight outcomes.

How can fights be “won”?

- 1. **Outsmart** opponent
- 2. **Out-skill** opponent
- 3. **Out-grit** opponent
- 4. **Physically overpower** opponent
- 5. **Luck** (beware deus ex machina!)

Making Fights Believable...

- 1. No one escapes unscathed
- 2. Pyrrhic victories
- 3. GRRM it
- 4. Research!
- 5. Respect the line between cool and silly

Further reading: *Violence, A Writer’s Guide* by Rory Miller & the *Writing Violence* series by Marc MacYoung.