

# CINEMATIC WRITING

*TEN (or more) TIPS*

*TO WRITE STORIES*

*THAT SNAP, CRACKLE AND POP*





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1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing

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# ARTICLE ... OR STORY?

INFORMATION vs EXPERIENCE  
TRANSFER KNOWLEDGE vs TRANSFORM READER  
POINT READER THERE vs PUT READER THERE



# RETHINK THE FIVE W'S

WHO = CHARACTER

WHAT = ACTION (what happened)

WHERE = SETTING

WHEN = CHRONOLOGY

WHY = MOTIVATION or CAUSALITY

HOW = PROCESS (how it happened)



# I. PICK A POINT OF VIEW

Whose eyes/experience are you telling the story through?

Where are you drawing the readers eyes/attention?



# AIDS in the HEARTLAND

**Jacqui Banaszynski & Jean Pieri**  
**The St. Paul Pioneer Press**



**Story told from perspective and  
interior life of couple dying of AIDS**





Dad was dead and Mom was trapped in the truck with the Christmas presents. The kids heard her calling their names, telling them she was OK, telling them to stay away from the truck.

The kids didn't need to be told anything else. They knew they were in trouble, and they knew they were on their own.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



David Matthew Kraus was  
accused, caught and  
convicted of statutory  
rape.

But he never paid for his  
crime, and he never will.

These are the people who  
paid:

(Michele Cook ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



Jessica Ostroushko, a Rosemount High School student who went to court at 14 to say she was forcibly raped by an older boy she considered a friend. Now 16, Jessica has had extensive counseling to deal with “rage and stuff.”

George Ostroushko, her father, an artist and former Vietnam War protester who bought a handgun and pledges to take justice into his own hands the next time someone messes with his family.

Lynn Ostroushko, her mother, a daycare provider who quit teaching religion classes at the family's Roman Catholic parish because her faith was shattered. She blames herself for letting her daughter leave the house with the boy.



## 2. FOLLOW A CENTRAL CHARACTER OR STORYLINE

Choose your main subject, central point and storytelling approach with discipline and purpose



Normally, 9 ½ year-old Danny would have been the one to go for help. He is the adventurer, a deer hunter who knows how to handle a muzzle-loading rifle, a wrestler at his grade school, a junior partner who wipes down the press at his father's new print shop.

His sister, Dawn, is older by 18 months but quieter and less aggressive. She expresses herself through ballet and tap dance instead of words. When her family first moved to the new house in rural Cologne five years ago, Dawn refused to walk to the school bus stop alone. She still doesn't like to venture into the dark basement, preferring to send Danny on her errands.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



But Danny's leg was broken  
when he was thrown from  
the truck. Dawn had a  
broken arm but could still  
walk. It wasn't an easy  
decision, but it was the only  
one: She would go.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



**Refugee tries to lock up a two-wheel lifeline**

**~ by Leonora LaPeter Anton,  
Tampa Bay Times**

**Foto by Edmund Fountain**



Emmet Larry, 50, hoped for a pair of underwear, a bar of soap, maybe some soup. But what he really needed was a bike lock. He was afraid someone would steal the scarred red Huffy he uses to get around and collect cans for money.

(Leonora LaPeter Anton ~ Tampa Bay Times)



# 3. VARY “CAMERA” ANGLE & DISTANCE

Use your notebook as a camera

Zoom in for power

Pan out for explanation

Move quickly through transition



Susan Meyer, 35, a printer at Lifetouch National School Studios in Bloomington, suffered minor injuries and was released from the hospital Tuesday. **Doctors had to cut off her wedding ring to treat her fingers,** which were etched with shattered glass.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



Over the years, officers found her passed out in alleys and cars, once with an infant son at her side. Her **lips and nose would gleam with gold** because she had learned a basic lesson of chemist: Metallic spray paint gives the greatest inhalant high.

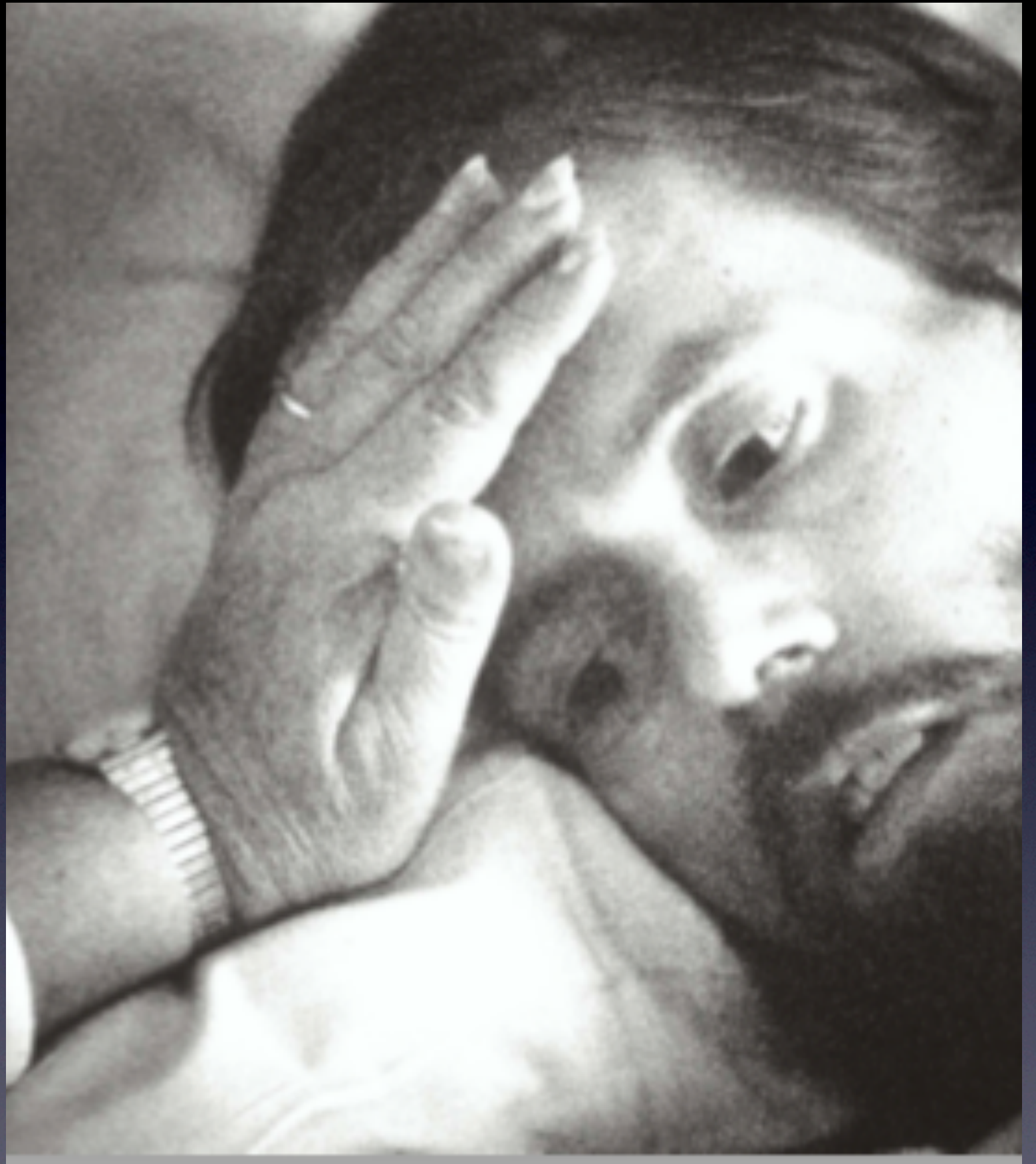
(Michele Cook ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



## **AIDS in the HEARTLAND**

**Jacqui Banaszynski & Jean Pieri**  
**St. Paul Pioneer Press**

The uncontrolled vomiting started a week before he died. He had nibbled on a **neighbor's moist zucchini bread**, declaring it so tasty he abandoned his precautionary avoidance of solid foods. When the retching began that night, nothing would stay down, not even medicine.





# 4. WRITE VISUALLY

Focus tight on telling details

*SHOW*: Be concrete & specific

~ not abstract or impressionistic

Cling to the bottom of the “ladder of abstraction”

Focus your “lens” with intention



Just after 9 a.m., in Operating Room 14 at Children's Hospital, the surgeon works his long, gloved fingers through Brenna's hair, gently braiding her blond bob into tiny pigtails.

It's a good thing Brenna's under anesthesia; she hates having her hair done. But if there were anyone in the world she'd allow to play with her hair, it's Dr. Richard Hopper — "Dr. Hoppy," to Brenna — her craniofacial surgeon and first schoolgirl crush.

The braiding secures stray hairs out of Hopper's way, clearing a path for the scalpel, and gives his fingers a warm-up. ...

(Julia Sommerfeld ~ The Seattle Times)



Hopper parts the braids to uncover a groove along the top of Brenna's scalp, a hairless white scar that runs ear-to-ear, a few finger-widths behind her bangs.

... Hopper tugs through the fibrous route slowly; there are potholes of missing skull — and unprotected brain — just beneath his knife. His assisting surgeon, Dr. Anna Kuang, soaks rag after rag with Brenna's blood.

Once Hopper has completed his cut, he slides a tiny spatula under the scalp to separate the skin and sheets of tissue from the skull. Then, as if he were rolling off a tight leather glove, he peels back the mask.

(Julia Sommerfeld ~ The Seattle Times)







"Please pardon our smell," she said.

Eddie, a first-grader when there was such a thing as a school to go to, was **wearing a red Spider-Man T-shirt**. Near the collar, his grandmother had **written in ballpoint pen, "Eddie Picou, DOB 10/9/98."** "I put that on so they could at least identify who he was," Picou said, and she began to weep.



# 5. USE IMAGERY, ANALOGY and ALLUSION

Make the uncommon familiar or  
accessible

Speak to imagination



Every night sparkles with campfires, and  
children are warmed further by the nearness of  
parents and siblings and cousins and friends,  
with no one to make them take a bath or get  
up early for school.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



And there are the twins, boy and girl, who save part of that night's leafy greens and begin to plant their own salad garden, seemingly confident it will grow them a forest of meals.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)





Her eyes trace her daughter's profile, shaped like a quarter moon. Brenna's gray-blue eyes bulge beyond their bony orbits. Her nose, cheeks and upper lip look deflated. Her lower jaw juts far forward, giving her a smile like a friendly snowplow.



At the level of bone, the face is an architectural marvel. Beams, ledges, arches and columns form and suspend the structures that protect the underside of the brain and allow us to breathe, see, chew and speak.

(Julia Sommerfeld ~ The Seattle Times)



Three weeks later, Brenna was diagnosed with Crouzon Syndrome, a genetic skull defect that occurs in about 1 in 25,000 births. Brenna's mutation was random; her two younger brothers were born with normal skulls and faces.

“If you think of the genome as the Encyclopedia Britannica, then her mutation is a single wrong letter in a single word,” says Dr. Michael Cunningham, director of the Craniofacial Center at Children's Hospital.



# 6. DIALOG vs QUOTES

Bring readers into the story

Let them listen in / speak to them  
directly

Reveal character through  
conversation



They're the senior Thelma and Louise of the Northern Rockies, which is to say, two women on the open road, guided by fate and moxie, and the whim of the moment, but without the guns and boyfriends — "We're past those silly things." Besides, they have husbands waiting for them back home.

"They're both on oxygen," Mary says.

"Emphysema," Vera says.

(Alex Tizon ~ The Seattle Times)



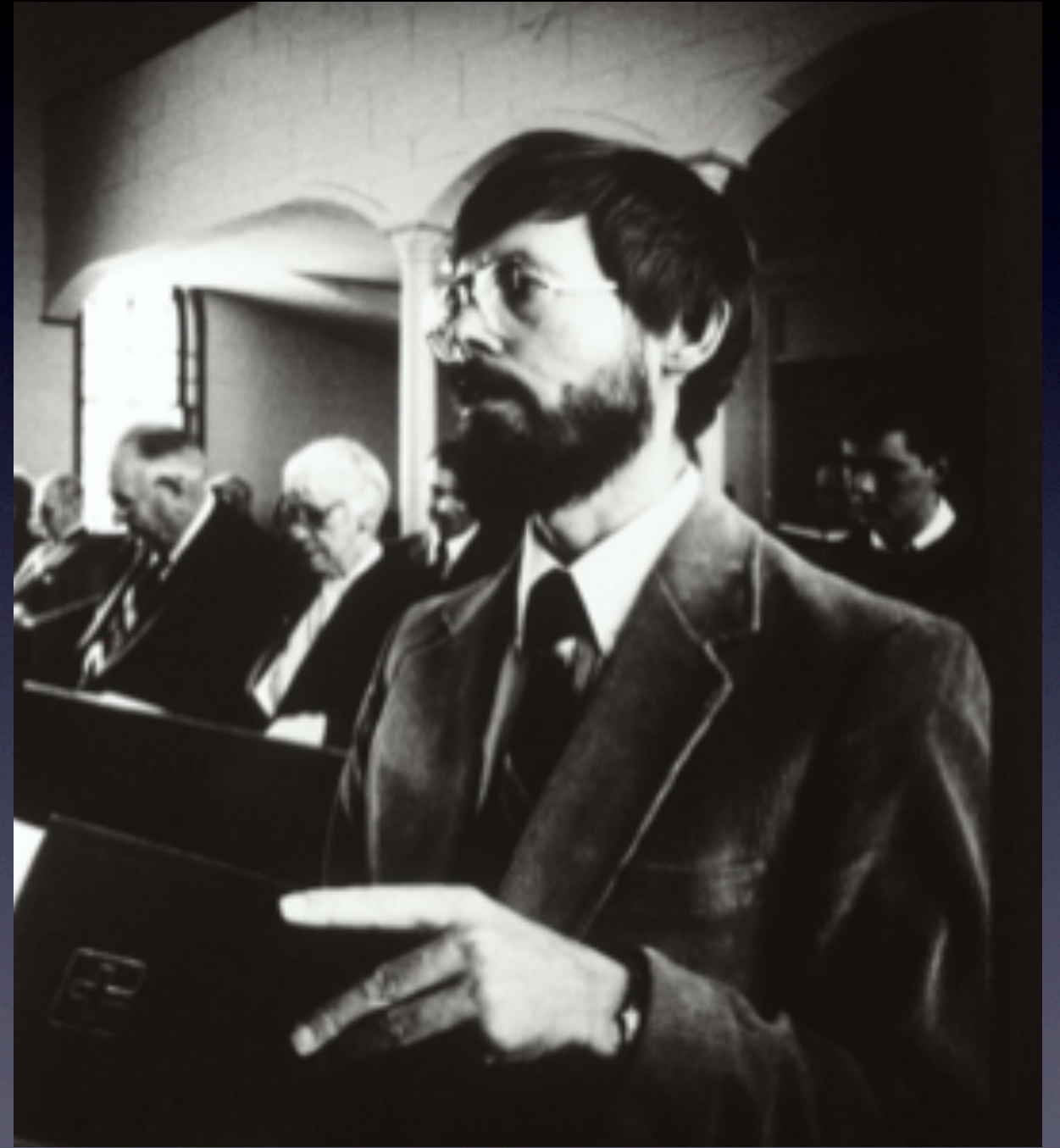
# 7. PUT SUBJECTS (AND READERS) IN PLACE AND ACTION

Set the story in “native habitat”

Show what a subject does – not just want  
they think or say

Use frames (day-in-a-life, etc.)







Or he can be found singing in the empty silo, practicing hymns for Sunday's church service.

His voice is sweet and natural, with a good range. It is inherited, he says, from his mother, who sang to him when he was in the womb and tuned in opera on the radio in the farm kitchen when he was a youngster. He has sung for his brothers' weddings but is better, he says, at funerals.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ The Seattle Times)



# 8. REPORT & WRITE W/ SENSORY DETAILS

Use the five physical senses

And the sixth ~ emotion



The men bury Adara Hailu's daughter just after sunrise Monday, Feb. 25. The gritty wind still carries a hint of night coolness, offering a few hours of reprieve from the searing punishment of the desert sun.

Calloused hands lower the child into a shallow grave in the rocky thornbush hill overlooking the swollen refugee camp. The air is fresher here. The stench from the camp's vast defecation field reaches the hillside in occasional gusts that sting the nostrils, but it is not the overpowering presence that it is below.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



Hopper works the serrated saw clean through the miniature cheekbones, which look like porcelain flying buttresses. He saws through the rims of the eye sockets and across the top of the nose, like he's drawing opera glasses. An earthy smell — thick and organic — trails his blade.

(Julia Sommerfeld ~ The Seattle Times)



Nashan Gorges is 6 months old. He weighs 9 pounds. He has pneumonia, diarrhea and advanced malnutrition. When Goverde pinches the infant's shrunken stomach, the parchment skin stays wrinkled, failing to bounce back with healthy baby fat.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



# 9. REPORT AND WRITE IN SCENES

Consider a broken or braided  
narrative

Ditch unneeded transitions or bridges

Power readers into each scene or  
section

Vary action and exposition



**Story by Lizzie Johnson ~  
The Columbia Missourian**

**Photos by Sally French**

# Letter carriers stick together through Postal Service upheaval





- Jeff Connell knows the name of nearly every resident in the 65203 ZIP code.
- Mail funnels into Columbia through the giant processing center near the Columbia Regional Airport.
- In 1958, jeweler Harry Winston wrapped the Hope Diamond in brown paper and mailed it from New York City to Washington, D.C., for \$2.44.
- Dale Wade keeps a print out of an old, faded email with him, the edges worn from folding and unfolding. Scrawled on the backside of the now-meaningless correspondence is a list: “Ways to Save the Post Office.”



# 10. BUILD TENSION & BEND TIME

*Start in media res*

~ foreshadow meaning and key moments

Set the story up – then spool it out

Identify tension or plot points along a narrative chronology

Weave backstory throughout



This is a story about love, war and fruitcake, and because it's easier to talk about, we'll begin with fruitcake.

Mary Williams, a retired librarian, has baked around 5,000 of them. She's been doing it for 33 years, sometimes baking as many as 500 in a single holiday season. She sells them for \$10 apiece and gives the money to the children.

That's how she refers to them, "the children," as if all the world's ragged kids were in the next room.

(Alex Tizon ~ The Seattle Times)



# II. CONTROL THE PACE

Start strong

Slow down for power scenes or

“learning” passages in middle

Speed up at end



# 12. END STRONG

Hint at what's next or...

Wrap back to beginning or...

Reinforce the main theme

Be careful with quotes



And, if your heart is not yet broken, Goverde pauses only briefly to glance at the eighth and last pallet on the plastic-covered floor. Thirty minutes earlier it cradled a 3-month-old, Koran Skikoy. Now it is empty. The child's mother wrapped her dead son in a blanket and carried him to the graveyard just as Goverde was beginning his rounds. Her walk to the cemetery took her under that first swing built by other children only a week ago.

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)



That afternoon, he and Mary Hanson-Jenniges planted a memorial petunia next to the geraniums on Hanson's mother's grave. A few days later, a church member was mowing the cemetery lawn and cut too close around the tombstone. The petunia was mowed down. Henningson was unperturbed. "The roots are strong. It'll grow back."

(Jacqui Banaszynski ~ St. Paul Pioneer Press)

