

WTheck is this Narrative Technique called Chekhov's Gun?

by Chazda Albright -

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Chekhov's Gun is the only kind of gun you can use in *any* story - even a kid's story. That's because it isn't a gun at all!

It's all about building up plot points - using only the most useful and interesting details.

The term comes from [Anton Chekhov](#) (1860-1904), who is today recognized as one of the most influential playwrights in history and a master short story scribe. He directly influenced fellow [Russian Realists](#) like [Leo Tolstoy](#) and [Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#), and his works have inspired the likes of [James Joyce](#), [Ernest Hemingway](#), [Tennessee Williams](#) and [Henry Miller](#).

There are two aspects of writing that Chekhov has given the world: a bittersweet-to-satirical mixture of comedy and drama woven together in a story, and the gun. More specifically, he created what was traditionally thought to be a Dramatic Principle specifically for playwrights – but it has crossed over to all forms of writing and is now considered a [Narrative Technique](#).

Chekhov's Gun: it's about how it fires

It's the idea that every element in a narrative must be **necessary and irreplaceable** – what's more, if it *isn't necessary or it is replaceable, then it should not be there at all*. This is an incredibly bold statement about writing, but I think it's excellent. When you get right down to it, Chekhov's Gun is what we've come to term Word Economy... which, let's face it - just isn't as thrilling a term, really.

Chekhov has in many situations been known to give fellow writers this particular advice. So you may have seen similarly worded quotes from him:

“Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it’s not going to be fired, it shouldn’t be hanging there.”

— Anton Chekhov

He doesn’t mean every story needs a gun - but he does mean that we should only include an item or detail if it’s going to be important to the story. Every detail has to have a purpose. Don’t use a detail because it’s nice or maybe enticing.

You’ve got to follow through. Push the action up. One way to be sure you’re doing that is by using your details and pulling those out to their best device.

Building plot is about establishing a great story concept, and then building upon that premise and keeping the action going... until you have a climactic moment. After that, it’s about establishing the Happy Ending (unless you’re writing a tragedy).

What Chekhov’s Gun is NOT.

It isn’t foreshadowing - a common misunderstanding of these two terms. Foreshadowing is another narrative technique. It’s when we have a story detail that behaves as a symbol in some way, and it tells us that a future action is going to be just like this earlier, symbolic one.

Chekhov’s Gun is never symbolic. It’s absolutely concrete. Too, what’s perhaps even more distinct about it - is that we have no idea what a future outcome might be. Let’s say the object is an American football. That there is one does not suggest that the main protagonist is going to become a great athlete. It doesn’t foreshadow any event. It just indicates that something will be done with that football.

If you have an object in a story, it needs to be there to assist a plot-purpose.

How to keep the gun loaded.

When you look at details in the story you’re developing, make sure that the characters are driving the plot forward. For more on [developing Rising Action, go HERE](#).

Action *isn’t* slipping on the banana peel that was left on the floor.

- Action is one person *tossing* a banana peel on the floor.
- Then someone comes and slips on it.
 - And someone else witnesses that action and

- reacts in a certain way:
 - laughs and points,
 - pretends not to notice,
 - helps them up, etc.
- The person who slipped can either:
 - cry about it,
 - or get up and walk away,
 - or get up, pick up the peel, and toss it in the trash,
 - or pick up the peel, and toss it down somewhere else on the ground...
 - where someone else can slip on it.

Make sure your action has double duty.

Don't have action just to have action. It should also reveal character, so that we learn to trust or distrust a character, learn to root for them or not. The depth of our emotion is only limited by your description and depth of the character's emotions.

Is emotion an action?

Absolutely, but only if you write it that way. What you need to remember about that: don't just describe the emotion. Show it. How is the character physically expressing their emotion? Anyone can feel sad. But different people express that emotion differently. So how a character expresses sadness will show us who they really are.

These are actions that show sadness for different types of people:

- Some people cry.
- Some go to the kitchen and start baking.
- Some paint.
- Some write.
- Some people just get really quiet.
- Some people slam and stomp around, a lot.

These are actions that show happiness for different types of people:

- Some people cry.
- Some go to the kitchen and start baking.
- Some paint.
- Some write.
- Some people just get really quiet.
- Some people slam and stomp around, a lot.

What changes here? The *context* of those actions.

Action + Context = Plot

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So when you think of the kind of word economy that comes from using Chekhov's Gun, try to think of it this way: it shouldn't just be present. It should be loaded, and every bullet should be a fantastic nugget of a detail.

When it fires, we will care.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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