

Sequencing of Perceptions and Emotions

There is a logical order to both perceptions and emotions. Writing should follow that order. Your scenes will best engage the reader emotionally when these experiences unfold naturally, as they do in real life.

With regard to perceptions, we do not take in everything at once. In any scene, our eyes move about in a logical manner, from one element to the next, often from the broad context down to the more focused and specific. Here are two examples. The first is out of order.

Richard burst through the door. In the blinding light, he saw her startled eyes open wide and her eyebrows arch up in fear. She was sitting in a chair alongside her bed. Dirty clothes were strewn on the floor and a chair lay toppled over directly before him. He almost missed seeing it in the sun-filled room.

And here is the same scene, but ordered in a more realistic and relatable sequence, the way the character would more likely take it in:

Richard burst through the door. The sun-filled room blinded him momentarily and he nearly tripped over the toppled chair that lay at his feet. Dirty clothes covered the floor. He looked up. She sat in a chair across the room and he saw her wide, startled eyes, her eyebrows arched up in fear.

In this scene, he initially sees nothing clearly because of the bright sun. He nearly trips on the chair, so he immediately looks down, seeing the chair and then the clothes strewn about. Only then does he look up and actually see her face. The sequence of his perceptions is logical, it is also better writing for another reason. The paragraph ends with what is most important in the scene.

Emotions also often follow a logical pattern, building up from confusion to comprehension to outright anger, love, disgust, etc. For example, let's say your character is walking through a dark woods and he hears a faint growl. As he walks on, the sound gets louder, more ominous and threatening, and he starts to be able to identify where it is coming from. His perception sharpens and grows with his movement. There are emotions attached to his perceptions and his curiosity, then anxiety, and then fear grow in that order, as he moves forward.

With both perceptions and emotions, applying logical sequencing is a great way to take your reader with you on your character's emotional journey.