

Creating Chapters

How do you structure chapters? I think there are as many ways to do this as there are authors on the planet. Every novelist has their own ideas about where to break up their text. I've been reading *East of Eden* and noted Steinbeck's approach. A long novel, he has divided the book into four major "Parts," each representing a period of time, ten-to-twenty years apart. These parts include a total of 55 chapters. In general, new chapters represent a change in the principal character or location. The chapters are further divided into four or five sub-sections. In these, the change is usually the next phase of the current story, such as the character in the preceding sub-section encountering another character.

So that's Steinbeck. In my books, I don't see the need for major "Parts." I do like to start a new chapter when there is a change in the main character, time, or location. That approach typically results in a lot of chapters, some of them quite short, especially since I don't spend a lot of time on description and back stories. This is a blessing and a curse. For readers with short attention spans, it is nice to finish a chapter quickly and start the next one later. It offers an easy break. Other readers may not like the frequent stops and starts. They might like longer chapters. I suspect older readers are generally more patient.

For the story I am currently writing, a novel of historical fiction which differs from my previous work, I am considering longer chapters with more description, separated by sub-sections. These sub-sections don't have to be numbered a la Steinbeck, but they do need to be separated somehow, so I am leaning toward a small centered row of asterisks between the sections.

Many authors feel all chapters should be about the same length. That can enable the reader to know he/she can finish a chapter after an expected amount of time. That's well and good, but I think it is more important to let each chapter end naturally, so that would be whenever the action, scene, or day, for example, is complete. That is why my chapters can be a page or twenty pages.

Ideally, each chapter should lead into the next. I always want to end a chapter with some drama, some open question, that induces the reader to continue to turn the page. At times, this can be a true cliffhanger. For example, say I have a scene with a character in a darkened basement. During the chapter, he has been down there looking for something, but then he hears the owner of the house walking on the floor above. That is a moment that might end the chapter. Done right, it leaves the reader eager to turn to the next chapter. Or it keeps them interested while the next chapter goes off in a different direction, a different part of the story. The reader will certainly be wanting to come back to resolve the cliffhanger, but I can have the reader wait a bit by inserting other chapters. It will keep them reading because the cliffhanger situation is in the back of their mind.

One very common approach is to start a new chapter when there is a change of the character who was the focus of the previous chapter. Say for example I've been telling Bill's story, how his life of crime has led to his current unhappy marriage. The next chapter can shift to his wife's point of view.

Still another reason to start a new chapter is when the plot takes a turn. Let's say Jerry and Vito, two friends, are arguing about money Jerry owes Vito. The fight escalates and Jerry pushes Vito down the stairs. Things will never be the same between them. The next chapter starts with the new normal. While Vito recovers from a broken arm, he learns Jerry has disappeared. No longer friends, he vows to kill Jerry.

In summary, any logical break or change can dictate a new chapter or sub-section. It is the author's choice, contingent on pacing and perhaps the kinds of readership he/she has. The critical thing is to keep the reader wanting more. Chapters need to end with readers wanting to know more, worrying about a character, or hoping for some resolution. To me, chapter length only matters if you are seriously worried about reader attention span. But whatever structure the writer chooses, it should feel natural and follow the flow of the story.