There was a cartoon in *The New Yorker* many years ago in which the female host of a posh party accosts one of her guests: "I've just learned that you wrote a novel based on somebody else's screenplay. Please leave my house at once." It's true that novelizations are the antithesis of literature, but when I was a teenager, desperate to learn how to write, I read dozens of them. Why? Because in a piece of fiction, every nuance can be described in words. It was fascinating to see the ways in which writers described scenes that I'd already watched on the big screen. (In point of fact, of course, most novelizations are written before the movie is completed. The writers of the book versions have probably never seen a single frame of the film, so the way they describe the action is often quite different from the way it was actually shot.)

For writers beginning today, there's an even better tool available than novelizations: the new interpreted-for-the-blind movies on video. These use the secondary audio channel to provide a running commentary, often of a very high caliber, describing in vivid words the scene that's simultaneously unfolding in pictures. Watching these can be a terrific way to learn how to bring a scene to life verbally; the best one I've seen is the for-the-blind version of Casablanca.

Although I'm part of the minority that thinks *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* is one of the best SF films ever made, just about everyone likes the last bit of dialog in the film. Unfortunately, the novelization of *ST:TMP* is by none other than Gene Roddenberry (and it's so clunky, unlike the Star Wars novelization, which is putatively by George Lucas but was actually written by Alan Dean Foster, that I'm inclined to believe Roddenberry really did perpetrate it). How does Roddenberry portray this climactic moment in the book version? Just by reprinting the dialog, without any real description:

> Kirk turned to the helm. "Take us out of orbit, Mr. Sulu."
> "Heading, sir?" DiFalco asked.
> Kirk indicated generally ahead. "Out there. Thataway."

Now, let's see how that might have been handled better. Remember, a scene in any book has to carry all the emotional freight on its own; it's not supposed to be a mere transcript of something people have already seen:

> Jim returned to the center seat. It wasn't his old chair, but he would have to get used to it. He heard the whirring of the little motors in the chair's ergonomic back as it nestled into his spine.
>
> He knew everyone on the bridge was waiting for what he would do next; it was his ship, at last and again, and he was back where he belonged. Ahead of him, he could see the backs of Sulu and DiFalco's heads, and between them -- -- between them, the stars, steady, untwinkling, beckoning.
>
> Jim's heart was pounding. He allowed himself a moment to gain composure,
>
> then gave the familiar order. "Mr. Sulu, ahead warp one."
>
> Sulu's voice was filled with excitement, with anticipation. "Warp one, sir," he acknowledged, while sliding the master velocity control on his helm

console forward. The deckplates immediately began to vibrate, and a growing hum filled the air.

Chief DiFalco half-turned in her seat to look back at Kirk. "Heading, sir?"

Jim was still caught up in the beauty of the cosmos. He leaned forward, and his voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Out there," he said.

He glanced to his right; Scotty was standing beside him, eyebrows raised. Jim couldn't quite suppress the grin that was growing across his face. He was back, and the adventure was just beginning. He flipped his hand nonchalantly ahead.

"Thataway ..."

The trick is to appeal both to the emotions and to the senses: tell us what people are feeling, what they're thinking, and, when appropriate, what they're seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. You have much more control over the reader's experience than a movie director does. A director can't be sure what part of the frame any given viewer might be looking at, but when you write "there was permanent dirt under his fingernails, the legacy of decades of archeological fieldwork," you know exactly what the reader is contemplating.

Of course, you shouldn't weigh down every bit of business with lots of detail; it may be sufficient to say "she rode the bus to work." But when something major is happening, increase the amount of description; think of your words as swelling background music, denoting the importance of the scene. Description does more than just make vivid the reader's image of the story; it also lets you control the timing of experiences. Don't just blurt out, "The butler did it!" Rather, play out the moment, stretch things, build the suspense, make the reader wait:

"Of course you all know by now who the killer is," said the detective. He paused, looking from face to face, taking in the sea of expressions -- fear and agitation and anger, one man biting his lower lip, another nervously smoothing out his hair, a woman with eyes darting left and right. The clock on the mantelpiece clicked loudly to a new minute. Rain continued to beat a staccato rhythm against the window. The detective, milking the moment for all its drama, extended his index finger and swung it slowly from chest to chest until at last it came to rest pointing at that hideous chartreuse cummerbund. "The butler did it!"

Pauses don't have to be large to convey volumes. Here's an entire scene from Terence M. Green's 1992 novel *Children of the Rainbow*:

It was almost midnight when McTaggart made the decision.
"I think," he said, "that we should go closer."
The others stared at him.
"Maybe fifteen miles away."
Nobody said a word.
"Force their hand."

Even though the other characters do nothing, their inaction communicates their nervousness, their failing resolve, their fear that their leader has gone over the edge. Try it without the description:

"I think that we should go closer. Maybe fifteen miles away. Force their hand."

Nothing. No tension. No suspense. Description isn't padding -- it's the heart and soul of good writing.