

PACING



PACING

WHAT IS PACING?

If plot is the *order* of events, pacing is the *rate* of the events; it's how you maintain tension.

As I mentioned before, for pantsers the writing is in the revision. I would *further* argue that the revision *is in* the pacing. How do you know when you're ready for revision (and, therefore, to address pacing? Read on, my friend.)

Are we there yet?

Writers ask me all the time how to know when their book is done. Well, it's never done. But you can sense when it's *complete*: when all the characters arcs are tidy, and the plot arc comes round. There's no science to this one; it's just a general feeling of wholeness to your piece.

When you're at that point, you've filled in as many blanks as you can see, you're ready for revision.

Can you think about pacing in the prewriting and writing stages? Sure, but it is a far more useful consideration in the *revision* stage.

Something I've never seen any other writing course do is address *when* in the writing process to start thinking about each of these elements.

That's the hard part, right? Figuring out *when* to do *what*.

This module is going to help you to start thinking about that process.

To that end, here's a big hint:



Here's another hint: The most important element to keep in mind as you are working through the revision is the *reader's experience*.

If the three most important things to keep in mind when buying a house are: location, location, location; then the three most important components of revision (and therefore pacing) are: audience, audience, audience.



There are two main components to quality pacing: balance and economy.

Balance and economy are similar in that they both consider the quantity of any given element you add, refocus, eliminate, or change altogether.

Let's step back into the kitchen. Everything in a recipe works in relationship to everything else, right?

So, “how much pasta do I need?” is going to depend on the flavor I am going for. Two pieces of pasta for a whole can of sauce wouldn’t work very well. There has to be a *balance*.

Let’s explore: Some people put sugar in their spaghetti sauce, and a little goes a long way! Using just a little is *economy*, but the ingredient (Sugar, in this case) is still acting in proportion to the other ingredients--one teaspoon may be underwhelming in the pot to feed an army, and overwhelming in a single serving.

Similarly, the elements of quality writing are always working in balance with one another (Balance) and in reasonable proportions to one another. (Economy)

Balance *i.e.* How much pasta do I need to balance out the sauce?

Economy *i.e.* How much is too much/too little based on how much of the other ingredients I have?

I’ve broken the pacing sections into two subsections (balance and economy), but keep in mind that in *practice* they are intertwined.

Let’s step into the kitchen again. Scratch that. Even better, let’s step into the dining room.

I hand you a hot, steaming delicious breadstick, just the right amount of melted parmesan and sea salt. Before you take a bite do you want to chat about the amazing attributes of yeast and flour?

Probably not.

Your mouth is watering because of the effectiveness of the *interrelationship* of the ingredients. The attributes of each one are irrelevant--when they work together *well*. When they don’t, we all know, whether we’re talking breadsticks or novels, right? We feel when something is out of balance, there’s too much of something, not enough of something else.

This effective intertwined, well-crafted mess is what you’re shooting for and what we’re going to talk about: how these two ingredients work *together* to create a quality reader experience--a third entity greater than the sum of its parts.

Please pass the Gestalt.



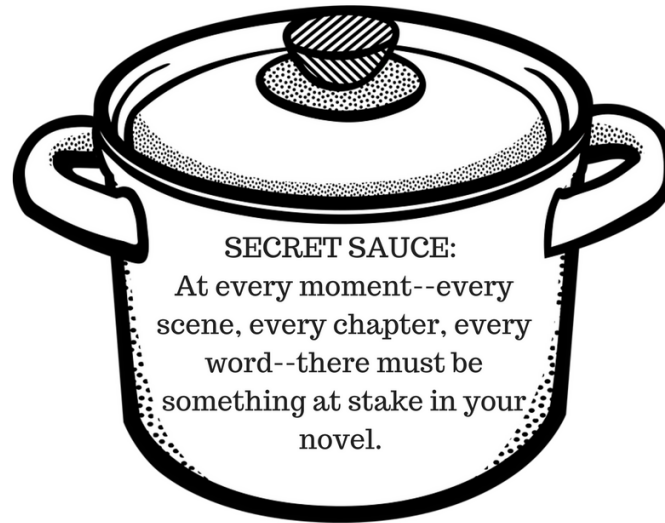
BALANCE

Stake and a side of fries

Ah, the Paris bistros and their quintessential *Steak Frites*. Imagine people-watching, gathering information about human behavior, our quirks and our gestures, not far from the *Palais Chaillot*. You jot notes in your leather-bound notebook and sip your miniature cup of *cafe*.

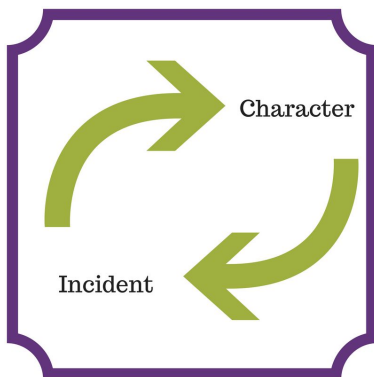
But I digress, and all for the sake of a cute title.

The *real* point here is that there must always be steak, er, *stake* in your writing.



Always having something at stake is the underlying principle behind each of the points I am going to guide you through in this section.

The great novelist Henry James wrote in *The Art of Fiction*: “What is character, but the determination of incident? What is incident but illustration of character?”



As you can see in the diagram on the left, these two elements push one another forward through the novel.

Notice that we have here another vortex, a cyclical pattern with increasing strength. Not only is a vortex the nature of novel writing, but of the novel itself. (Whoa, *meta!*)

What’s at stake for the character pushes the incident. What happens moves the character. And around and around we go.

I Gots to Use It

Once upon a time, I was a Kindergarten teacher with the Teach for America program in the Mississippi Delta. My students used a colloquialism I found both charming and endearing. Rather than ask “May I go to the bathroom?” they would say “I gots to use it,” usually accompanied by a pee dance.

Here's how you're going to *use* this gratuitous anecdote: You've got to create a sense of urgency in your writing. You've got to go *now*. We need an answer *now*.

Remember there's a balance, but even over breakfast, there needs to be something at stake. Don't waste a single moment of your novel.



Urgency and stakes are two sides of the same coin.

- Stakes are what the author creates.
- Urgency is what the reader feels.

Use whichever perspective helps you to create a page-turner. (We'll talk in depth later about how to do that, but every quality novel needs to have a heavy dose of one of these main ingredients.)

Let me play with urgency for a moment. (Indulge me. Remember what I said about the importance of play to creativity.)

I can't take it anymore. She thought as she fumbled with the house keys. *That damn door.*

It was another thing she'd asked David to fix, one of things he'd "get around to."
"I'll get around to it, honey." How many times had she heard that as the spoon clinked in the glass, stirring round and round? Chocolate milk. Cinnamon milk. Cinnamon *blueberry* milk.

It was an obsession.

She jiggled the key and finally found the sweet spot.

If he puts that milk jug back in the refrigerator one more time without the lid, I will walk out without a word.

The door swung open on the third push, and Doris nearly dropped the heavy grocery bags hanging from her wrist.

She fumbled her way across the living room toward the kitchen to the now too familiar dirge: *Clink. Clink. Clink.*

“Hi hon.” David looked up at her from the open fridge, his arm extended into the white light.

Doris bit her lip, as she heard the familiar thud of the heavy jug hit the shelf.

She closed her eyes, unsure how long she could carry the heavy load.

He shut the refrigerator door and turned to her.

“Have a good day?” David asked, as he lifted the glass of milk to his lips.

You want to know, don't you? Is there going to be a milk cap on the counter when she gets to the kitchen? Is she going to leave him? Look, I just made you care about a milk cap.

Now this is just an exercise in silliness, and this story isn't really going anywhere, but the point is: use urgency, create and maintain tension in every object (doors, grocery bags, and, yes, milk caps), every gesture, every thought or word spoken.

Try it. Let me know how it goes.

Write your urgent story here:



REMEMBER THAT LIFE'S A GREAT BALANCING ACT--DR. SEUSS

There's a lot to balance in life, and there's a lot to balance in fiction.

In fiction we need to balance emotional intensity; action; character complexity.

What you need to balance, and how you need to balance them will depend largely on what type of plot you are working with.

As we saw in the plotting module, both plot-driven and character-driven plots have elements of action and emotional depth, but plot-driven novels focus more intensely on action than character development, and character-driven novels do the converse.

This fact is going to influence what needs to be balanced in any given novel.

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If you're working on a character-driven novel, you'll need to balance the emotional intensity of the overall piece.

If you're working on a plot-driven novel, you'll need to balance the pacing of the action.

Remember: there are no hard and fast rules here. Every novel contains elements of action *and* character development. Balance is always essential. What I mean is: don't skip ahead to the next section. (I knew what you were up to. I saw you turning the page.) Just because you write plot-driven novels, doesn't mean you don't need to understand the importance of balancing emotional intensity, and vice-versa.

Emotional Intensity



One of your jobs as a writer is to evoke emotion. Ever cried at a movie? Quality writing.

(Personally, as a child, I excused myself to the bathroom at the end of *The Sound of Music* **every.single.time**. so no one would see me tearing up. I don't think I've ever told anyone that. My secret's safe with you, right?)

Evoking emotion is a great responsibility. Consider these two friends.

- 1) The drama queen. Everything's urgent. Everything's a disaster. Everything's certain death and no solution.
- 2) Mr. Understatement. He's the guy who breaks his back, hobbles himself to the hospital, then mentions it nonchalantly six months later. He's Mr. Buttoned Up. My lips are sealed. I-got-nothin' Dude.

Ok, so maybe you've got these people in your life, and a whole bunch of normal friends. (Is there such a thing as normal friends?) It's an average Saturday night, you want to hang out, whom do you call?

Normal friends. Almost every single time. Right?

Why? We like to limit our emotional extremes, in general. Sure, we hang out with the others *sometimes*. We like them; they may even entertain us. (They *definitely* entertain us.) But they can be exhausting.

Spending time in emotional extremes demands energy from us. It's ok from time to time, but we don't, generally, make it a lifestyle. We are, in general, programmed to avoid living in emotional extremes. (Remember the brain and its stress response?)

And yet...

The rules of writing are nothing like the rules of real life.

In real life we censor ourselves, leave out the gory or embarrassing or overly personal details of the stories we tell about our daily lives.

In writing, we have to be so brutally honest about the human emotional reality of the situations we portray, we are left feeling exposed—if we have done our job right.

Good writing is—unlike all of the people with which we are surrounded--and even ourselves, if we dared be totally truthful about it—honest to the point of purity.



Perhaps this is why those of us who love to read have such a deep connection to quality writing: its honesty is such a relief, so compelling, such a breath of fresh air, that we miss the characters-turned-friends once we've come to the end of a good yarn.

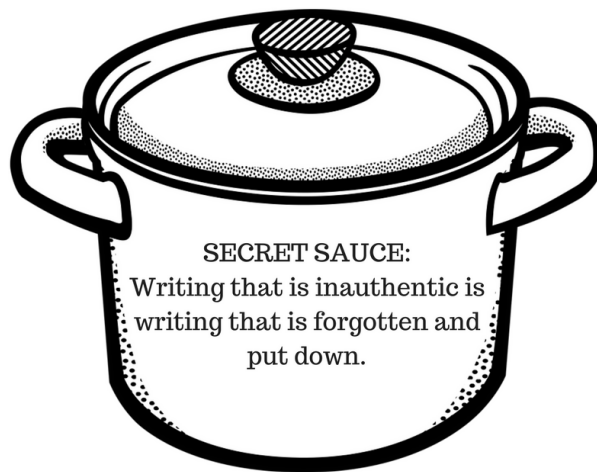
Good writing is that guy you invariably end up sitting next to on the plane who wants to tell you every detailed encounter with the middle school bully, or every hobby his grandkids ever pursued...except when it's *good* writing, it's actually *interesting*. The story is compelling even though you're not male or have never crossed paths with your school's bully or have no kids nevermind grandkids. It has an emotional reality to it so convincing that not only do you believe it, you *feel* it—and you want more.

This is what good storytellers do. Yet doing so is surprisingly difficult, which is perhaps why Hemingway compared writing to sitting in front of a typewriter and bleeding. If we're doing it right, the rawness of our humanity bleeds out onto the paper.

The process to create writing that is true to the human experience is akin to the Velveteen Rabbit's process of becoming real. "Does it hurt?" the rabbit asks in Williams' children's story.

Where writing is concerned, yes, it hurts. It hurts because it is difficult to draw on those emotional reserves, to extract the essence of the most challenging moments we have lived through, and because honesty—especially with ourselves—can be unnerving even in small doses.

But is it necessary? Absolutely. Writing that is inauthentic is writing that is forgotten and put down.



When we write we are given permission to break free from the mold of societal expectations about oversharing. In fact, our stories fall flat due to *undersharing*.

And like the Velveteen Rabbit's becoming real, learning to share at this level, to reach those depths of honesty with ourselves and our readers, and finding the voice to express it, all take time.

It doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby.

But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. (Williams)

The same could be said, I would argue, for the creation of good writers.

Writers must be real—first with themselves and, in turn, with their audiences. We must be willing to be the oversharer on the plane to the point of hyperbole, to tell not only the story, but to reveal its deepest emotional and psychological underpinnings. This catharsis requires a lot of mining. (The process may also be why Hemingway suggested writing while intoxicated, but that's a different topic for another day.)

So, go ahead: put yourself out there. Be “that guy” on the train. Be the grandma with the wallet-sized photos of her plethora of grandchildren. But tell it *real*. Tell it *raw*. Be, as a writer, the person polite society rejects in walnut-panelled parlors for saying what was best left unsaid. Oversharing is the burden of being a good writer, but it is, too, its simultaneous freedom.

Make Up Your Mind!



“Ok, so what you're telling me, Annalisa, is that I should not be too emotional, but I've got to be super emotional. Which is it?”

Yes.

The trick to quality writing is to be *real* without being *dramatic*.

This is what people mean when they say “Avoid sentimentality.”

Because we are programmed to limit emotional stress, you, as the writer--as the emotional mitigator of the novel--have an important job to do.

You need to balance the emotional swings of your novel.

Think of it this way: You've got Pooh, and Tigger, and Eeyore. Who gets the most time center stage? Pooh. Why? He's neutral. Tigger, like, ohmigosh and what, and now I'm here, and oop, here we go, and woohoo. I love Tigger, but he takes a lot of energy to hang out with.

And then there's Eeyore. Oh Eeyore so sad and dreary, down in the dumps, Eeyore. Sad, Sad, Eeyore. That takes a lot of energy too, right?

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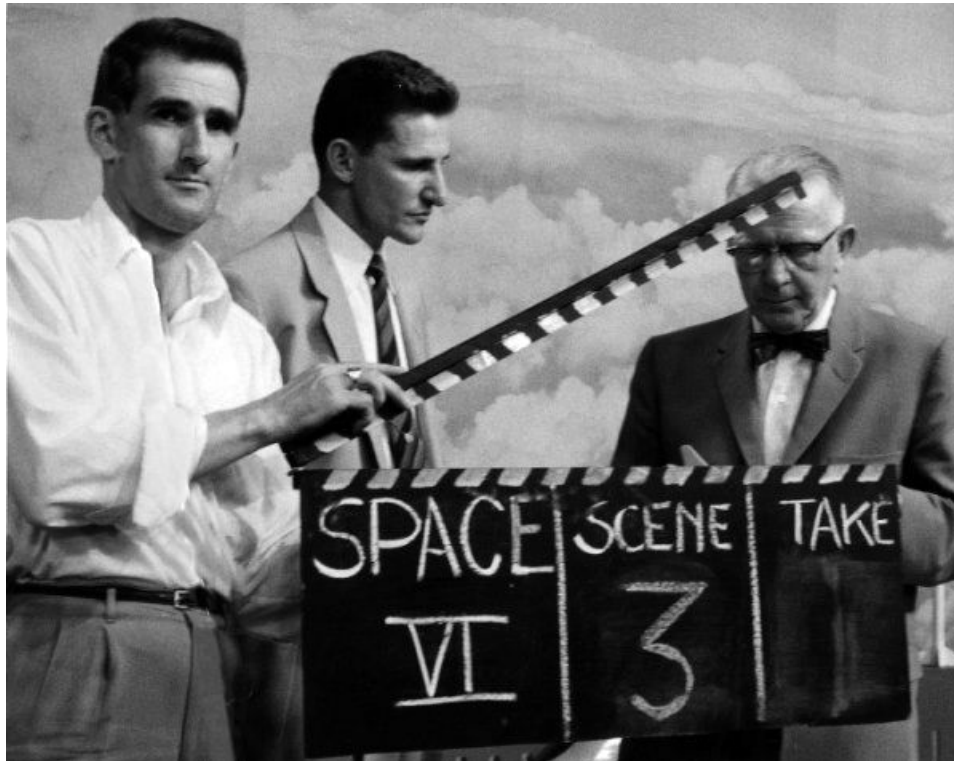
You are swinging the pendulum between emotional extremes *and*: to every action there is also an opposite and equal reaction. (That should be, like, a law or a rule or something.)

|-Eeyore-----|-Pooh-|-----Tigger-|

Most of the emotional tension is going to take place right around the middle (Pooh), but if you swing to high, sometime soon, you've got to swing the same distance toward low.

How do I know which is which? How do I measure?

Again, another frustrating element of writing and revision, because there's no unique answer. The godsend here is that we, as writers, like actors, in general, have an entrenched sense of empathy. We can usually *feel* what is right, once we read through a draft.



AND...ACTION!

In real life, we have lots of goals, dreams, and aspirations. We've got several projects that take up our time: our family, friends, home, jobs, etc.

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Characters are not afforded this luxury. While you don't want your characters to be flat or one-dimensional, they are *limited*.

What am I talking about? We are complicated, we human beings, with a constant internal monologue and conflicting desires and, and, and. This complexity is not only difficult to convey, but it's difficult for the reader to keep tabs on.

If we knew the characters on the same deep level we know those who are closest to us, **and** (And the "and" here is important) we followed along on their adventure and knew all of the details, that would be overwhelming. There would be too many threads to keep track of.

As the author, you choose which threads to go deep on, and which to only scratch the surface with.

Remember that thingie I said about balance. Here's another balancing act.

So, if you're writing a psychological novel, and you're digging deep into character, you're probably going to have fewer characters and less action. If you're writing a quest, you'll likely have a lot of action, and perilous situations, and maybe one character we know well, but not too, too well.

Case in point: Detectives in crime fiction novels are working to solve only one mystery. In reality, of course, detectives work several cases at once.

Why is the balance of limitations important? Can you imagine the scenario where we have a detective working on the blue case and discovering the body, then running off to the red case where the fingerprints have just revealed the identity of the murderer, Colonel Mustard, and now he's got to dash off to the conservatory to reinvestigate the crime scene. But wait there's a phone call about the blue case...

I am exhausted just thinking about it.

One of the conventions of this genre is to simplify narrative by handling one case at a time. (In general. All rules, of course, have exceptions.)

Consider how you need to *limit* some things, in order to *enhance* others in your narrative.



(There's that thingie about balancing again.)

The point here is balance in your reader experience. Remember at the beginning of this chapter I told you the three most important considerations in pacing: audience, audience, audience? Well, here's how you take heed of that advice.

If you make your plot non-stop exciting with a bad guy around every corner, it's going to exhaust your reader. Likewise if you lumber to your point, and beat around the bush, your reader is going to get tired, and put down your book.

You will have high-excitement moments. You will have emotionally difficult moments. And the bulk of your novel will be just regular old getting from here to there moments: entertaining, lots at stake, but not overly emotionally charged.

On Being a Character

Sometimes English-teacher types (We won't mention any names; save that for your therapist.) like to throw around lots of fancy lexicon without telling you *why* it matters.

"Hamlet is a dynamic character whose character arc is juxtaposed by...blah, blah, blah..."

You've tuned out. They're showing off, and you're not interested.

I know. I was never that teacher. (God help me; I *hope* I wasn't!) and I am not that writing coach, so here's uh what we goin' ta do.

Let's review character types, and I'm going to tell you *why you should care*.

Wait, characters? Wasn't that a few modules ago?

Uh huh. I knew you were smart. That's why I like you. Keep reading.

We have two main ways we talk about characters. They are either dynamic or static AND either round or flat.

Let's talk about science again.

Stop rolling your eyes.

In physics, that which is dynamic is that which is related to force of motion. Motion. Keep that word in mind.

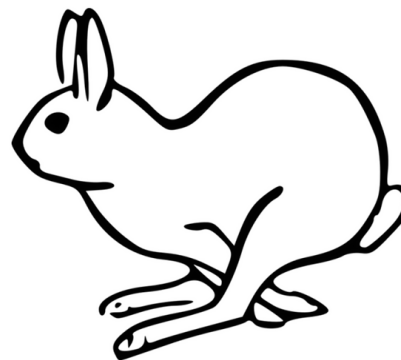
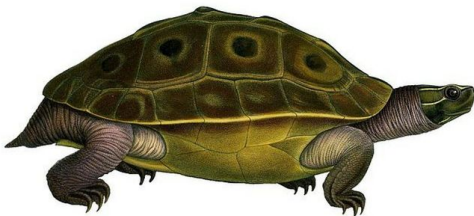
Again, in physics, that which is static is that which does *not* produce motion.

Ok, science lesson over. You may wipe the sweat off your brow now.

Look, I don't *know* why we writers borrowed terms from physics, but we did. Here's how the terms apply: Characters who are dynamic *move*, they go somewhere, they change. They used to be sad, now they're happy. They were searching for a job, now they have a fulfilling career. They used to be lonely, now they're dead.

That got dismal fast.

Static:
A
character who
stays the same
throughout the story



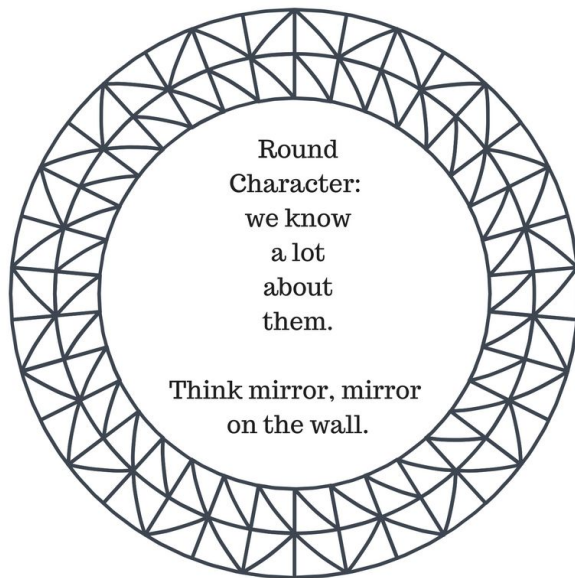
Dynamic:
A
character
who changes
over the course
of the story

Moving on.

When we think about flat vs. round characters, we're thinking about how well we know the characters.

A round character is someone we know well, they're fleshed out, if you will. They're in 3D. A flat character is someone we know very little about, and don't need to. These are movers and shakers in the background of the story.

For all y'all visual learners out there, here's the skinny:



OK, vocabulary lesson over.

Some of those Englishy types also think they're teaching you important concepts, when really they're just teaching you what words mean. I claimed not to be one of those hooligans, so let me prove it.

Let me tell you *why you care* about these words, and why this aspect of character belongs in the pacing section.

When you consider your characters, you'll want to make sure that you have appropriate *balance* of character types. This is not 19th century British literature; we do not need every character fully fleshed out. (No offense to some of my favorite authors: Austen; Dickens; Thackeray...)

Think of a see-saw when you balance this section. If you've got one round character, be sure to have a flat one to balance him out; same goes for static and dynamic.

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Were you the kid who tried to move in front of the see-saw seat, tried to scoot down the pipe, closer and closer to the middle to see if you and your friend could balance, exactly evenly and hover in the air?

Good! Be that author. Balance out the *degree* to which your characters are flat and round, dynamic and static.

The key to a good novel is to have every aspect in balance.

Yes, this is why writing is work.

Think of your favorite sitcom.

Every moment of intensity is balanced with a moment of down time.

In each episode, a different character faces some challenge, while someone else fades into the background.

In the middle of the battle, Lancelot is not *also* having an existential crisis. He's just slaying the dragon (or whatever.)



And now for...

The Rainbow Bridge from Balance to Economy

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We'll be back, after this chapter break.