Elements of Suspense in Writing: 6 Secret to Creating and Sustaining Suspense

It’s all the same: Building apprehension in the minds of your readers is one of the most effective keys to engaging them early in your novel and keeping them flipping pages late into the night.

Simply put, if you don’t hook your readers, they won’t get into the story. If you don’t drive the story forward by making readers worry about your main character, they won’t have a reason to keep reading.

Think: Worry equals suspense.

The best part is, the secrets for ratcheting up the suspense are easy to implement. Here are six of the most effective.

1. **Put characters that readers care about in jeopardy.**

Four factors are necessary for suspense—reader empathy, reader concern, impending danger and escalating tension.

We create reader empathy by giving the character a desire, wound or internal struggle that readers can identify with. The more they empathize, the closer their connection with the story will be. Once they care about and identify with a character, readers will be invested when they see the character struggling to get what he most desires.
We want readers to worry about whether or not the character will get what he wants. Only when readers know what the character wants will they know what’s at stake. And only when they know what’s at stake will they be engaged in the story. To get readers more invested in your novel, make clear: 1) What your character desires (love, freedom, adventure, forgiveness, etc.); 2) what is keeping him from getting it; and 3) what terrible consequences will result if he doesn’t get it.

[9 Practical Tricks for Writing Your First Novel]

Suspense builds as danger approaches. Readers experience apprehension when a character they care about is in peril. This doesn’t have to be a life-and-death situation. Depending on your genre, the threat may involve the character’s physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual or relational well-being. Whatever your genre, show that something terrible is about to happen—then postpone the resolution to sustain the suspense.

We need to escalate the tension in our stories until it reaches a satisfying climax. Raise the stakes by making the danger more imminent, intimate, personal and devastating. So, if the moon explodes in Act 1, the entire galaxy better be at risk by Act 3. If tension doesn’t escalate, the suspense you’ve been developing will evaporate.

It’s like inflating a balloon—you can’t let the air out of your story; instead, you keep blowing more in, tightening the tension until it looks like the balloon is going to pop at any second.

Then blow in more.

And more.

Until the reader can hardly stand it.

Incidentally, this is one reason why adding sex scenes to your story is actually counterintuitive to building suspense. By releasing all the romantic or sexual tension you’ve been building, you let air out of the balloon. If you want to titillate, add sex; if you want to build suspense, postpone it.

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2. Include more promises and less action.
Suspense happens in the stillness of your story, in the gaps between the action sequences, in the moments between the promise of something dreadful and its arrival.

When I was writing my novel *The Bishop*, I began with the goal of letting the entire story span only 52 hours. I thought that by packing everything into a tight time frame I would really make the story suspenseful.

As I worked on the book, however, I realized that there was so much that needed to happen to build to the climax that if I kept to my 52-hour time frame, events would need to occur one after another so quickly that there wouldn’t be space for suspense to happen among them. Finally, I added another 24 hours to the story to create the opportunity for the promises and payoffs that would make the story suspenseful.

If readers complain that “nothing is happening” in a story, they don’t typically mean that *no action is occurring*, but rather that *no promises are being made*.

Contrary to what you may have heard, the problem of readers being bored isn’t solved by adding action but instead by adding apprehension. Suspense is anticipation; action is payoff. You don’t increase suspense by “making things happen,” but by promising that they will. Instead of asking, “What needs to happen?” ask, “What can I promise will go wrong?”

Stories are much more than reports of events. Stories are about transformations. We have to show readers where things are going—what situation, character or relationship is going to be transformed.

Of course, depending on your genre, promises can be comedic, romantic, horrific or dramatic. For example, two lovers plan to meet in a meadow to elope. That’s a promise.

But the young man’s rival finds out and says to himself, “If I can’t have her, no one can.” Then he heads to the field and hides, waiting for them, dagger in hand.

The lovers arrive, clueless about the danger …

Milk that moment; make the most of the suspense it offers.

And then show us what happens in that meadow. In other words …
3. **Keep every promise you make.**

In tandem with making promises is the obligation of keeping them. The bigger the promise, the bigger the payoff. For example, in my first novel I had the killer tell a woman whom he’d abducted, “Your death will be remembered for decades.” That’s a huge promise to readers. I’d better fulfill it by making her death memorable or terrifying. In another book I had a character tell the hero that the villain had “a twist waiting for you at the end that you would never expect.”

Another huge promise. Readers think, *OK, buddy. Let’s see if you deliver.*

That’s what you want.

So you’d better deliver.

A huge promise without the fulfillment isn’t suspense—it’s disappointment.

Every word in your story is a promise to the reader about the significance of that word to the story as a whole. This is where so many authors—both of suspense novels and of fiction in other genres—fumble the ball. If you spend three paragraphs describing a woman’s crimson-colored sweater, that sweater better be vital to the story. If not, you’re telling readers, “Oh, by the way, I wasted your time. Yeah, that part really wasn’t important to the story.”

Never disrespect your readers like that.

When stories falter it’s often because the writers didn’t make big enough promises, didn’t fulfill them when readers wanted them to be fulfilled, or broke promises by never fulfilling them at all.

Here’s a great way to break your promise to the reader: Start your story with a prologue, say, in which a woman is running on a beach by herself, and there are werewolves on the loose. Let’s see if you can guess what’s going to happen. Hmm ... what a twist this is going to be—she gets attacked by the werewolves! Wow. What a fresh, original idea that was.

How is that a broken promise? Because it was predictable. Readers want to predict what will happen, *but they want to be wrong.* They’re only satisfied when the writer gives them more than they anticipate, not less.
I’m always annoyed when an author introduces a character, gives me background information on where she went to college, what she studied, her love interests, her favorite snack food and so on, and then kills her off right away or fails to give her any significant role in the story.

When readers invest their time, they want that investment to pay off.

Make big promises.

Then keep them.

4. Let the characters tell readers their plans.

I know, this seems counterintuitive. Why would we want readers to know what’s going to happen? Doesn’t that give the ending away?

I’m not talking about revealing your secrets or letting readers know the twists that your story has in store. Instead, just show readers the agenda, and you’ll be making a promise that something will either go wrong to screw up the schedule, or that plans will fall into place in a way that propels the story (and the tension) forward.

Simply by having your characters tell readers their schedules, you create a promise that can create anticipation and build suspense:

• “I’ll see you at the 4 o’clock briefing.”

• “Let’s meet at Rialto’s for supper at 8.”

• “All right, here’s what I have lined up for the rest of the morning: Follow up on the fingerprints, track down Adrian, and then stop by the prison and have a little chat with Donnie ‘The Midnight Slayer’ Jackson.”

A story moves through action sequences to moments of reorientation when the characters process what just happened and make a decision that leads to the next scene. We do this in real life as well—we experience something moving or profound, we process it, and then we decide how to respond. Problem is,
in those moments of reflection, a story can drag and the suspense can be lost. During every interlude between scenes a promise must be either made or kept.

And, if you resolve one question or plot thread (that is, you keep a promise you made earlier), introduce another twist or moral dilemma (in other words, make another promise).

When a story lags it's almost always because of missing tension (there's no unmet desire on the part of the characters) or not enough escalation (there's too much repetition). To fix this, show us how deeply the character wants something but cannot get it, and escalate the story by making it even more difficult to get.

**[The 12 Dos and Don'ts of How to Write a Blog]**

**5. Cut down on the violence.**

The more violence there is, the less it will mean.

This was a problem I faced with my thriller *The Knight*. In the story, a killer is reenacting 10 crimes from a 13th-century manuscript that was condemned by the church. If I showed all 10 crimes, the story would have certainly included lots of gruesome violence, but the murders would have gotten boring after a while. Instead, my investigator finds out about the killings partway through the crime spree, and he has to try and stop the killer before the final grisly crime.

A murder is not suspense. An abduction with the threat of a murder is.

If you want readers to emotionally distance themselves from the story, show one murder after another, after another, after another; but if you want to build tension, cut down on the violence and increase the readers’ apprehension about a future violent act.

The scariest stories often contain very little violence.

And, of course, different genre elements dictate different means of suspense. In a mystery you might find out that a person was beheaded. This occurs before the narrative begins, so the focus of the story is on solving the crime. If you’re writing a horror story, you’ll show the beheading itself—in all of its gory detail. If you’re writing suspense, the characters in the story will find out that someone is going to be beheaded, and they must find a way to stop it.

Reader expectations, and the depth and breadth of what is at stake in the story, will determine the
amount of mystery, horror or suspense you’ll want to include. Nearly all genres include some scenes with them. As a writer, it’s vital that you become aware of how you shape those sequences to create the desired effect on your reader—curiosity, dread or apprehension (see the chart on this page).

Also, remember that valuing human life increases suspense. Because readers only feel suspense when they care about what happens to a character, we want to heighten their concern by heightening the impact of the tragedy. Show how valuable life is. The more murders your story contains, the more life will seem cheap, and if it’s cheap, readers don’t need to be concerned if it’s lost.

[Here are 7 reasons writing a novel makes you a badass]

6. Be one step ahead of your readers.

When I write my novels I’m constantly asking myself what readers are hoping for, wondering about or questioning at each point in the story. Our job as writers is to give them what they want, when they want it—or, to add a twist so that we give them more than they ever bargained for.

Here are some ways to do that to amp up the suspense:

→ **As you develop your story, appeal to readers’ fears and phobias.** (Phobias are irrational fears, so to be afraid of a cobra is not a phobia, but to be afraid of all snakes is.) Most people are afraid of helplessness in the face of danger. Many are afraid of needles, the dark, drowning, heights and so on. Think of the things that frighten you most, and you can be sure many of your readers will fear them as well.

→ **Make sure you describe the setting of your story’s climax before you reach that part of the story.** In other words, let someone visit it earlier and foreshadow everything you’ll need for readers to picture the scene when the climax arrives. Otherwise you’ll end up stalling out the story to describe the setting, when you should be pushing through to the climax.

→ **Countdowns and deadlines can be helpful, but can work against you if they don’t feed the story’s escalation.** For example, having every chapter of your book start one hour closer to the climax is a gimmick that gets old after a while because it’s repetitious and predictable—two things that kill escalation. Instead, start your countdown in the middle of the book. To escalate a countdown, shorten the time available to solve the problem.

→ **As you build toward the climax, isolate your main character.** Remove his tools, escape routes and support system (buddies, mentors, helpers or defenders). This forces him to become self-reliant and
makes it easier for you to put him at a disadvantage in his final confrontation with evil.

→ Make it personal. Don’t just have a person get abducted—let it be the main character’s son. Don’t just let New York City be in danger—let Gramma live there.

No matter what you write, good prose really is all about sharpening the suspense. Follow these six secrets, and you’ll keep your readers up way past their bedtime.

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