

How to Create Suspense in your Writing

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What is suspense?

Official definition:

“A quality in a work of fiction that arouses excited expectation or uncertainty about what may happen.”
(OED)

But let's be more practical:

Suspense is not about your *story*, it is about *emotion*. It is not *what* you write, it is *how* you write. It is a style.

Suspense is not the same thing as mystery.

Mystery is an *intellectual* process, in which the reader tries to guess “who done it.”

Suspense is an *emotional* process, in which the reader becomes nervous, excited, or anxious.

In **Alfred Hitchcock's** words:

Mystery:

“*Something strange or not known that has not yet been explained or understood.*”

Suspense:

“*A feeling of excitement or anxiety while waiting for something uncertain to happen.*”

Lee Child compares the question “How do you create suspense?” to the question “How do you bake a cake?”

“*How do you bake a cake?*” has the wrong structure. It's too indirect. The right structure and the right question is: “*How do you make your family hungry?*”

And the answer is: You make them wait four hours for dinner.

This is what suspense boils down to. You pose a question the readers will care about, then you delay the answer to that question for as long as possible. You do this for your overall story arc, but you can also do it on a smaller scale, over and over, chapter by chapter.

Tips for Adding Suspense to your Writing:

Tip #1: Make big promises, and make them soon:

Example: *James Bond will get the girl and save the world. Keep reading, and I'll tell you how.*

Example from my newest book: *The Neanderthal tribes will soon move from the foothills into the river plains, and there is going to be big trouble. Keep reading, and I'll show you how our heroes survive the coming conflict.*

After you make the promise, refuse to keep your promise for as long as possible.

Suspense is not the fight between our heroes and the Neanderthals. Suspense is *waiting* for the upcoming fight.

Tip #2: Create Parallel Plotlines

Write chapters or scenes from the viewpoints of unknown characters. When you do this, you are telling the reader: *This person is somehow related to our hero and to the story. Keep reading, and I'll show you how.*

Tip #3: Start Chapters and Scenes with Urgency or Discomfort

Start each chapter or scene with something urgent instead of a typical situation.

Your character wakes up, brushes his teeth, and has his coffee = no urgency

Your character wakes up late for work because he did something he shouldn't have done the night before = urgency

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out what he did the night before, and if he'll get fired for being late.*

You can also start chapters and scenes with discomfort.

Your character is waiting for the bus, but she is dying to have a drink.

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out why she needs a drink so bad, and why she doesn't just go get one.*

Tip #4: End Chapters and Scenes with Cliffhangers

A cliffhanger could be an answer to a question, a new question, a twist, or a character's revelation.

At the end of your scene, your character suddenly realizes all the puzzle pieces are starting to come together (a Eureka! moment).

At the end of your chapter, your character survived the attack, the realizes another danger is ahead.

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out what the character just realized. Or... Keep reading to find out what the new danger is.*

Tip #5: Withhold information

A reaction is a good way to do this. Your character finds something, like a photograph or document, and he's terrified, amazed, or happy. However, you don't reveal what the object is.

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out why the photograph terrified the character.*

Another good way to do this is to give your character something she needs, but not the opportunity to use it. Your character finally discovers the password, but someone is coming in the door, so she can't use the computer.

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out if gets to use the password, and what she finds out when she does.*

Important: Make sure you have a believable reason why your character cannot use the object now.

Tip #5: Give your Characters Secrets

Your character creates meth and is a drug dealer. No big deal, right? Tell the reader your character used to be a high school chemistry teacher. Now the reader is intrigued.

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out how Walter White went from high school teacher to drug kingpin.*

Tip #6: Foreshadow unpleasant situations

Speaking of *Breaking Bad*, the show effectively used foreshadowing in many of the episodes. At the beginning of episodes, they showed what happens near the *end* of the episode. This makes the viewer want to find out how they are going to get from A to Z.

Example: “If I thought then that it was the worst summer I’d ever have, I was badly mistaken.”

Important: Using foreshadowing only works with specific ways of using Point of View. When you are telling a story from a character’s limited POV, you cannot describe future events. However, you can show scenarios that indicate that something is likely to happen soon.

Tip #7: Use Brief Reminders of the Stakes

Keep them brief, but don’t let the reader forget how important the situation is. Your character sees a child in a car that drives by, briefly reminding her that she is going to lose custody of her own kids if she doesn’t get her life together.

As *Dan Brown* puts it, “*Oh yeah, and don’t forget the killer just entered the house.*”

Tip #8: Use Small, Seemingly Unimportant Actions

Your characters check his watch, or he taps his fingers against his glass. Your character paces back and forth, or he stares out the window absently. The possible actions are limitless, and the reader knows every action in your story has a purpose.

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out why she is staring out the window, and what she is waiting for.*

Tip #9: Use Tense Dialogue

“Anything else for you, sir?”

“Just this phone charger.”

“We have a sale on extra charging cables.”

“No, goddammit, this is it! You want my money or not?”

When you do this, you are telling the reader: *Keep reading to find out if he’s going to be able to charge his phone in time... or, why is he in such a hurry?*

Tip #10: Create Atmosphere

Atmosphere isn’t just for the movies! Examples of little details of atmosphere that could create suspense:

A ceiling fan that makes an annoying click with every turn.

The smell of urine in the apartment building hallway.

A forest or city street that is unusually silent.

People glancing at the character then quickly turning away.

A strange object you notice on the shelf when visiting a friend you have not seen in years.

These are just of a few of the endless ways you can create suspense!