

Creating Suspense



Suspense happens when a scene becomes charged with anticipation. It's the possibility of what might happen that keeps the reader on the edge of their chair.

A character who unknowingly carries a bomb around as if it were an ordinary package is bound to work up great suspense in the audience.
—Alfred Hitchcock

Creating Suspense

What is suspense?

A lot of writers think suspense is making the most twisted story, but it's not about the story at all. It's about storytelling. Suspense is emotions. And emotions come from how you tell a story and not what you tell. The Cambridge Dictionary defines **suspense** as:

"A feeling of excitement or anxiety while waiting for something uncertain to happen."

and **mystery**:

"Something strange or not known that has not yet been explained or understood."

On this, Alfred Hitchcock, once said:

"There is a great confusion especially in my particular job between the words mystery and suspense. The two things are absolutely miles apart. Mystery is an intellectual process guessing "who've done it?" But suspense is essentially an emotional process."

Think: Worry equals suspense.

Creating Suspense

Suspense is about emotions, but what does it mean for us, writers? What should we do to evoke these emotions in the audience? The answer is to give the reader information upon which they can make their own extrapolations about what is going to happen, but not enough to know what is really going to happen.

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.

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.

Creating Suspense

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 counter-intuitive 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.

Turn up the Sensory Detail.

By focusing on the right sensory detail, you can heighten the sense of potential menace in everyday objects.

Take this example from Brian Klems' co-written novel, "Amnesia". Peter Zak and Annie Squires approach a house where they suspect one of Peter's patients is being held captive.

Tall bushes shrouded a shadowy front porch. Only a sliver of light between drawn drapes suggested anyone was home.

Someone had made an effort to dress up the house for Halloween. On the small lawn, dried cornstalks were teepeed around a lamppost. A pumpkin grinned from the top of a wheelchair ramp. Opposite the pumpkin was a little barrel of chrysanthemums. Beside the front door, barely visible in the shadow, a scarecrow dummy wearing a cowboy hat was slumped in a chair. I exhaled, realizing I'd been holding my breath.

Annie got out and eased the car door shut. I did the same.

We moved up the side of the house, crouching as we passed under the dark windows. I was conscious of every sound—my own breathing, traffic whooshing up and down the adjacent streets, the far-off pulsing wail of a siren. At every step, the sound of leaves crunching underfoot seemed thunderous.

Here the traditional trappings of a New England autumn, like a pumpkin and a scarecrow dummy, seem ordinary and ominous at the same time.

Now let's take apart the pieces and look at what happens, alongside the sensory details that are used to create the suspense.

Scene synopsis:

Annie and Peter look at the house, get out of the car, and creep along the side of the house.

Sensory details:

- Bushes shrouding the porch
- Sliver of light between front curtains
- Grinning pumpkin
- Scarecrow dummy slumped in the shadows
- Peter holding his breath
- Peter hearing his own breathing, traffic whooshing, leaves crunching.

By making your character hyper-aware of sensations and sound, you ratchet up the dramatic tension. It all adds up to a feeling of impending danger, though it isn't clear from what.

Suspense is sustained by the absence of anything terrible happening, and the continued focus on detail.

Make Promises

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

Creating Suspense

“making things happen,” but by promising that they will. Instead of asking, “What needs to happen?” ask, “What can I promise will go wrong?”

“Suspense is about making and keeping promises. You say to the reader: keep reading and I’ll tell you how or why it’s going to happen.”
- Dan Brown

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.

Making promises raises key questions. Their goal is to grab, captivate, and accompany the reader until the end of the story. So they should be clear, simple, and easy to follow.

Big promises should be lasting, so try to keep them as late as possible. But be cautious, don’t exhaust your reader and make them give up on you.

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. (The 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 ...

Always End With a Payoff.

You can have a suspense sequence early in your novel that ends with nothing more than a harmless tabby padding off into the night. But as you near one of your novel’s end-of-act climaxes, the suspense sequence should pay off.

The payoff can be an unsettling discovery of evidence of a crime - finding a dead body, bloodstained clothing, a weapons cache, or that the floor of a basement has been dug up. The discovery might reveal a character’s secret. Finding love letters or a personal diary might reveal a hidden relationship between two characters. Finding drug paraphernalia in a car might suggest that a suburban matron has a secret life.

Or the payoff can be a plot twist: The bad guy confesses; the sleuth gets attacked, or locked in a basement, or lost in a cave; or the police show up and arrest the sleuth.

Here’s how the suspense sequence from *Amnesia* pays off a few pages later, after Peter and Annie break into the garage alongside the house.

It’s pitch-black inside, and Annie turns on a penlight and shines it along the fender of a red Firebird:

“Do you see what I see?” she asked, indicating a dent and a streak of dark green paint. I started to answer when Annie put her finger to her lips and doused the light.

The door to the house on the opposite side of the garage opened. I crouched. Footsteps were barely audible, rubber soles crossing the garage’s empty bay. As my eyes got accustomed to the dark, I began to make out a pale round shape, floating, suspended in the shadows at about head height.

There was a click and the room sprang to light. I blinked away the brightness. Angelo di Benedetti stood facing me.

“Well, if it isn’t the expert witness,” he said, sneering.

He wore a black turtleneck and baggy black pants, rolled at the ankle above combat boots. His handsome face was hard and a vein pulsed in his forehead. He had his hands in his pockets.

I wondered where Annie was, but I didn’t dare look at the spot where I knew she’d been not 10 seconds earlier. Another instinct told me not to move suddenly.

The payoff here is the appearance of the villain. But there’s a surprise, too - Annie disappears. Peter knows she can’t have gone far. So suspense continues as Peter confronts the villain, and all the while, Peter (and the reader) worry that Annie’s whereabouts will be discovered.

Creating Suspense

Use Foreshadowing to Make Promises

Creating a suspense sequence that ends harmlessly is a good way to foreshadow something more sinister that happens later in your novel. For example, in Chapter 3 your protagonist goes into a dark, dank basement and emerges, joking about things that go bump in the night. In Chapter 23, she goes down into that same basement, and this time she finds the villain waiting for her. Be careful you foreshadow and don't telegraph-giving away too much too soon is guaranteed to ruin the suspense.

Take Your Time

Slowing down time increases suspense. Here are some ways to slow things down:

- **Complex sentences:** To create a feeling of apprehension about what might happen next, use longer, more complex sentences rather than rat-a-tat, subject-verb-object.
- **Internal dialogue:** Let the reader hear your character's thoughts.
- **Camera close-ups:** You want the reader as close in as possible, experiencing the tension of your suspense sequence firsthand.
- **Quiet and darkness:** Stillness and shadows suggest hidden menace.

Modulate Suspense.

Building suspense takes time. The reader will lose interest if all you do is pile on descriptive paragraph after descriptive paragraph, no matter how much menace there is in your descriptions. Break the tension by having something happen that advances the plot or provides a moment of comic relief.

There are many ways to insert a pause into suspense. The telephone rings. One of the characters cracks a joke (in real life, we all use humor to get through tense times). Or, reveal something that seemed menacing to be ordinary: A scary shape turns out to be the shadow of a moonlit tree; a hand placed on your protagonist's shoulder turns out to be his best buddy, come to help; boot heels stomping across a deserted parking lot turn out to belong to a man carrying a child on his shoulders. These are false payoffs. The reader thinks *phew*, and relaxes.

Use this technique of inserting a brief respite or comic relief into a suspenseful scene to give readers a break, then continue to ratchet up the suspense to keep them hooked.

Withhold information

Withholding is another effective technique that can be used anywhere in a chapter.

A reaction is one of the best ways of doing it. For example, *your hero finds something, a document or a photo, and she's terrified, amazed, or happy.* You, as a writer, show her reaction, but not the photo or the document instead. You withhold this information, you only emphasize the importance and the context of the information.

Another good option of withholding is when you **give your character what she needed, but you don't give her an opportunity to use it.** For example, *the hero gets the desired password to a computer with secret information, but the guards are coming, and she has to leave. Or she just got an important mail, envelope, but the bad guys were waiting for it, and now there is a chase and no time to read the mail.*

Withholding should be done with care, mostly because reasons for withholding should be believable. If your hero got an important mail and decided: "I'm going to take a bath first," the reader would think what the hell is going on?

Put secrets in characters lives

Another great way to make big promises is flashbacks. Dan Brown in his master class told a great story about his experience with "Breaking Bad" series. A friend of his told him that he would like the series. Dan asked what the series were about. When he heard it was about drugs, he refused. Friend asked him to watch just the first season. Dan refused. His friend asked him to watch the first episode. Dan refused. His friend asked him to watch the first three minutes. Dan agreed and found himself a week later watching season 5 finale. That happened because the authors used flashback amazingly well to make a big promise: "Keep watching, and we will tell you how a humble chemistry teacher became a tough drug dealer."

Putting secrets into characters lives can be a powerful tool, especially when you show the difference between whom a character was and whom he became.

Creating Suspense

Exercise in Using Suspense

Here's some suggested exercises that may appeal.

Create a character or use one from your existing works. Develop a list of traits and a flaw that you will exploit to put them in a suspenseful situation.

Write a scene showing your character in a comfortable situation where their characteristics and traits can be demonstrated. Although it will be a short piece, see how you go with building reader empathy for the character.

Now create a scene with the character in a situation that will be suspenseful. With a short exercise like this, there is no need to resolve the scene.

To help with this exercise consider these questions;

- Is this a short story or a novel?
- What is the setting and mood of the scene?
- What secrets could lead things to going wrong?
- What is the character's frame of mind?
- Could the character have had a trauma that affects the way they view the situation?
- Is this the main plot or a side story?
- What clues could you put in earlier parts of the story to provide foreshadowing and make this scene more suspenseful?
- What kind of conflict is happening in your scenes?

Here are some possible prompts to kick things off;

- Write about an event from your day in a manner that creates a feeling of suspense (even if it wasn't suspenseful).
- A person gets behind another at the supermarket self-checkout. The person ahead of them is dressed in hunting clothing and are buying an extraordinary quantity of bleach. They appear to be on edge.
- At the funeral of the patriarch of an old, well known, family in the region, a stranger asks to say a few words.
- Four friends meet for their weekly lunch, the fifth member of their group is absent.
- A person is on the phone at one in the morning.

Or work it into the existing story that you're still working on because you never got it finished in the last writing challenge. (*Phew! There's an out.*) No word limit. (*Phew! There's another out.*)

Have fun.



Sources

How to Create Suspense:

<https://writingcooperative.com/writing-101-how-to-create-suspense-d7d58232047a>

5 Ways to Make the Ordinary Menacing in Your Suspense Novel

<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/5-ways-to-make-the-ordinary-menacing-in-your-suspense-novel>

6 Secrets to Creating and Sustaining Suspense

<https://www.writersdigest.com/write-better-fiction/6-secrets-to-creating-and-sustaining-suspense>