



FROM

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.COM

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The tension begins

The suspense is killing me! I hope it will last.

—Oscar Wilde

It's easy to look at **tension, suspense and surprise** and think, "Oh, that's good for a mystery or a romance, but my story doesn't need those things" or "I'm not writing suspense, why does that matter?" But really, every story should have suspense, tension and surprise. Why are these elements so important? **They're what keep readers reading.** Sadly, readers aren't as indulgent as your friends and critique partners—we have to give them a reason to believe read on.



So what's the difference between the three? Surprise is fairly obvious, but suspense and tension are often used interchangeably (and I'm sure at least some of my sources won't use the same terminology that I'm choosing). However, for the purposes of this series, I'm going to use "suspense" to mean things that propel us forward in the story—things that make us want to read the next scene. "Tension" will be the events within a scene that keep us from skipping that scene to get to see the next one 😊.

In other words, tension is a scene-level (or page-level, since we will be looking at Donald Maass's book) element—something that makes this particular scene interesting, that makes us care about it as readers. Suspense is the larger, overarching thing that keeps us reading once the scene is over—though, like I said, there's plenty of overlap in those areas anyway.

Surprise, like I said, is fairly obvious. An unexpected event occurs. (This would be a counterexample.)

All three are necessary for a good story. I like the way Noah Lukeman puts it in [The Plot Thickens: 8 Ways to Bring Fiction to Life](#): "**Suspense, more than any other element, affects the immediate, short term experience of the work**" (119). Tension can be used to create that suspense, compel readers to read through the scenes themselves and keep them interested. Surprise is important because, well, nobody wants to read a story where they already know everything that's going to happen!

So for . . . the next little while, we're going to look at how (and how not to) create tension and suspense, how to use them, and how and when to use surprise.

Photo credit: [Aart von Bezooven](#)

The source of tension, suspense and surprise

This may be a little obvious, but the most basic source of tension, suspense and surprise is **conflict**. We all know it [makes a good story](#), but it can also make a story great.

All techniques to create suspense and tension have conflict at their heart. Just scroll up for [37 ways to increase suspense and tension](#)—most of them involve creating or highlighting conflict.

Obviously, most of the external plot and internal conflict come from conflict—the obstacles that stand between our protagonist(s) and their goal. That will be the main source of the suspense that keeps the readers wanting to know more.



However, on a smaller level, **conflict within a scene establishes and heightens the tension**. This is one reason why it's [so important to have a scene goal](#) for the character—once the character wants something, it's easy to bring in that conflict, to prevent them from getting that goal. A story where the character decides he wants chips, goes in the kitchen and gets chips . . . well, it really isn't a story, is it?

Rather than being an element to create surprise, conflict is important in making a surprise matter. **An unexpected event has a much bigger impact if that surprise creates conflict.** Take [Jane Eyre](#). (If you've never read it, *SPOILER ALERT*.) Jane and her employer, Mr. Rochester, fall in love. Imagine if the surprise revealed at their wedding is that the source of the spooky noises in the mansion was his crazy sister? "Oh, well, you have a questionable genes. I still do." The end. But his crazy wife? That's a real surprise—and a real conflict.

Conflict, on a macro level and a micro level, is not just the heart of a story—it's the heart of suspense and tension, as well. It's what makes the events—and especially surprises—of a story matter to us.

Photo credit: [Cristian V.](#)

Surprise—and betrayal

We haven't touched on surprise too much, despite it being in the title of our series. There are two reasons I included it: the difference (or delicate balance) between [suspense and surprise](#), and the fact that surprises can be used to create tension and suspense. But surprises can also be done very, very badly.

Most of the time, **surprises shouldn't come out of left field from the other side of the [Green Monster](#)**. As writers, it can be very gratifying to pull one over on your readers. But it's even more gratifying if you've surprised them *despite* the foreshadowing and clues you've planted throughout your story. Without something the reader can go back through and identify as a clue ("Oh, man, I should have seen it coming!"), they're likely to feel betrayed.

The **clues and foreshadowing can be a great tool to build an amorphous suspense**. If you keep them vague but strong, that sense of foreboding will carry through your work, pulling the readers with it—and they'll still be stunned when you pull off the big reveal.



But I think the **worst kind of surprise is when we base a surprise on something the point of view character already knows but hasn't told the reader**. To me, that's basically lying—leading the reader to believe that we'll all be together and we'll tell the reader everything, but holding back the one thing that our character would know or think or realize that would make the experience complete for the reader.

I don't mean that we have to spell out everything the character knows the exact second he or she knows it—or have the characters spill their guts to one another. But if the main character has known the truth all along—or they came into the story knowing some arcane fact that's going to solve the case—that's the kind of surprise that's going to ring false to a reader unless it's supposed to be the point of the whole story (and even then . . . ouch).

So how much foreshadowing is enough? It depends on how big the surprise is—and how central it is to the plot. (Helpful, I know.)

Photo by [Benson Kua](#)

Conflict and suspense in structure: Act I

We've established that [conflict is the source](#) of suspense and tension, and what gives meaning to surprise. Combined with structure, we can create a plot with enough suspense and tension to keep our readers engaged.

In Raymond Obstfeld's [Fiction First Aid](#), he looks at the intersection of conflict, suspense and plot, taking it act by act in the [three-act structure](#). This week, we'll take a look at his structure for creating suspense.

Obstfeld defines suspense creation as "a series of . . . promise-payoff scenes." In act I, the setup, we establish the conflicts and the stakes to create suspense. Says Obstfeld:

- **Plot conflict.** *This focuses on what the characters are pursuing. It could be a romantic relationship, money, a new job, an education—anything they think will **make them happier**.*
- **Character conflict.** *This focuses on the internal/emotional problems that get in the way of the characters achieving what they think will make them happier. In fact, this conflict may involve the characters pursuing the wrong goal, one that the reader realizes **won't** make them happier.*
- **Stakes.** *This focuses on the intensity with which the plot conflict affects the characters.*



Photo credit: [Damon Brown](#)

Keep the suspense in the middle: Act II

Oh, **the sagging middle**. The bane of most Americans' existence. And also tough for writers 😊 .

The sagging middle is where we can start to feel a little lost. Even if we've done a good job [establishing conflicts and the stakes](#) in the first part of the story, sometimes the middle has us feeling like we're running in circles or spinning our wheels. Are our characters making progress, or are all these obstacles we put in their way (because you *are* putting



obstacles in their way, right?) starting to make them wander aimlessly?

In [Fiction First Aid](#), Raymond Obstfeld acknowledges that this part of the book is a challenge—as we try to make the story more difficult for the characters, it's often more difficult for us.

But he also offers a structural solution. He explains that Act II is The Complication where we “increase [the] suspense by complicating [the] plot through **increasing stakes** and/or **decreasing [the] ability of [the] character to achieve [his/her] goal.**”

So in Act I, we established the stakes—whether the character will lose his job or let a killer go free if the hero fails. In Act II, we **increase the negative consequences of failure**—the character will go to jail or the killer will go on a rampage if the hero fails.

Also, we can “**inhibit [the characters'] ability to get what they want.**” The guy clinging to his job tries to do something to impress his boss, but it backfires and ruins a major project. The hero after a killer gets suspended from the force/agency/whatever after his drive takes him just a little too far.

Interestingly, **many plotting methods and structures have specific events designed to accomplish these things.** In [Larry Brooks's Story Structure](#), for example, Act II contains two “[pinch points](#)” that are designed to raise the stakes by showing us just how bad the villain is. Even the [Mid-Point](#) is designed to help with this, showing the hero more to the story, changing the way he views the world.

Once we've established suspense in Act I, **we have to build on it in Act II** to keep our readers reading—and hooked.

Photo credit: [Todd Stadler](#)

Wrapping up the suspense: Act III

Eventually, all suspense and tension must be released—since anticipation is the source of suspense and tension, it’s probably not fair to readers not to eventually satisfy that anticipation. Naturally, this will happen to some extent throughout the story as we build up anticipation for events along the way. But the overarching suspense of the story reaches its ultimate payoff in the last part of the story, in the final act.

In fact, Raymond Obstfeld refers to Act III as The Payoff in [Fiction First Aid](#). Here, we have to satisfy all that suspense we’ve worked so hard to build—and **that payoff had better be commensurate with the anticipation**, or our readers will feel cheated.

Obstfeld says, “The key to a good payoff is not to give the reader what you think they want” (55). That’s not to say that the hero and heroine shouldn’t get together in a romance (they should), or that the hero can’t catch the villain in a thriller (he should). It *does* mean that **giving the reader exactly what you promised all along and only that is not enough to reward the suspense** you’ve created for that goal.

This is a **common reason why we don’t like the way a book ends**. I read a book last year where the entire book was about the heroine learning about others and herself—but at the end, she went back and did the same thing she’d been planning to all along (*and* it was rushed). All along, I was promised some revelatory, life-changing experience, but in the end, the character didn’t change.

After spending hundreds of pages with these characters being thwarted in their quests, yes, they have to see some measure of success in the end (unless this is a tragedy, I guess). But that hard-won success probably shouldn’t just be the exact thing they’ve looked for all along. Take [Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade](#). Indy is reluctantly dragged into looking for the Holy Grail, which he doesn’t really believe exists. What does he find in the end? (Yeah, he finds the grail—but is that all?)

A good payoff is both unexpected in some way and commensurate with the suspense the author has created.



Photo and baking credit: [Heartlover1717](#)

Finding your weakness

When it comes to tension, suspense and surprise, it's very hard to find your own weaknesses. Or, sometimes, to admit them.

Hi. I'm Jordan, and sometimes I write boring crap. And I leave it in. Even though people tell me it's boring.

I'm trying to get better. (Hence this series.) But the more I work on specific areas in my writing, the more I realize I need help, and I may always need help. I think I'm probably not alone. Most of us allow at least a little indulgence as we're drafting—words, lines, paragraphs or scenes that don't necessarily move the story forward. And then sometimes we get a little too attached.

The fact is, when you're still in love with your characters and your story, you're more than willing to read the scenes that don't really move the story along. One way to counteract this is to set the story aside. Yes, we're always told to do this, and this is a big reason why. Set it aside for 6 months to a year and **give yourself some distance from the work.**



I am so not that patient. Once I've patched up the glaring holes and inconsistencies I know I've created, I'm willing to let my work go to one or two of my beta readers to make sure there aren't any big structural/common sense/plot holes I missed. I'm okay with them taking a few months—but the minute I get their notes back, I'm ready to jump in again. That's usually not long enough. (I also have a fairly good memory.)

Those **beta readers and critique partners** help in other ways, too. As far more impartial readers who want to help you make your story better (we hope), they have a vested interest in helping you eliminate all the weaknesses. They aren't as attached to your story and your characters, so they are better at identifying places that don't do much to move the story forward—the parts where their attention starts wandering. (Also helpful: the parts where they don't know what you're talking about.)

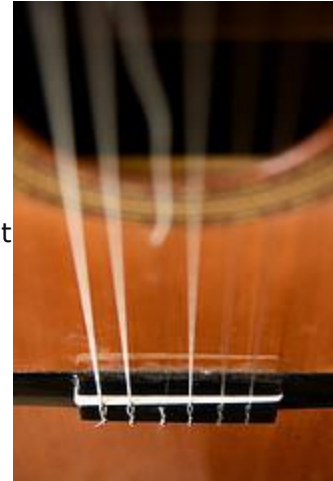
Tomorrow we'll look at what you can do to find those weak tension points yourself—once you're ready to let go of those things you love so much.

Photo credit: [Big Eagle Owl](#)

Putting the tension in your self-editing

When you're editing yourself, it can be hard to see which of your scenes are low in tension. For tension, a **scene-level edit** is a definite must. For each scene, ask yourself:

- Character's goal: Is it **clearly stated or irrefutably implied**? (That [scene goal in the scene chart](#) thing? Yep. Plus, a scene chart and/or spreadsheet is a really convenient here.)
- Bring on the conflict: Can/should I **cut to where the conflict for that goal starts**? Is that the worst conflict I could use here?
- Bring out the conflict: Have I **stated why this is a difficult/delicate situation**?
- Length: Is the scene an **appropriate length for its significance**? (That applies to both word count and the passage of time in the scene.)
- Setting: Could **another setting lend more tension** to this scene?
- Purpose: **Does this move the story forward**? Is my reason for having this scene good enough to justify this scene, or any scene at all?
- Ending: **Does the scene end with a disaster for my POV character's goal**? Do we cut away at the worst possible moment, something that will induce the reader to find out what happens next?
- Finally, rating: as Noah Lukeman recommends in [The Plot Thickens](#), **rate the scene tension on a scale of 1 to 10**.



Another method here is to **read the story backwards, scene-by-scene**. Or, I guess, you could jump around as long as you made sure you covered everything. That way, you know each scene will stand on its own—but if you change anything important, especially near the beginning, you'll just have to go through and fix all that again. (Which can cut both ways, of course.)

Of course, this whole method requires **brutal honesty**. No rating a scene higher because your heroine gets off a few zingers, no keeping a scene that doesn't serve any real purpose because it has that beautiful paragraph that it took you a month to write. Cut and paste your favorite parts (or the whole scene) into another document and you never have to actually "lose" anything.

Finding and fixing low tension scenes is just the beginning of making sure your story keeps your readers hooked. Let's look at finding problems with the overarching suspense in your story. (Gulp!)

Photo credit: [Samuraijohnny](#)

Assessing your suspense with pacing & promises

If assessing your own tension is hard, critiquing your own suspense level is even harder. But there are a few things we can try to look at objectively to help us find the places where our suspense gets weak. Examining the pacing, the promises and the parallels can point us to places where we need to punch up the suspense.

Pacing

The first place we can look is at the pacing. At Edittorrent, Alicia Rasley once [defined pacing](#) as “a measure of **how frequently important plot events happen in your story, how closely occurring they are.**”



To examine this, **make a list of the 10-20 most important events** in your story (things like Plot Point 1, the Climax, the Dark Moment, the Resolution, the Inciting Incident). Then go back to your [scene chart](#) and **highlight those scenes** (note that some of them may take more than one scene). Literally—select the whole row in the spreadsheet or draw a big, fat star on the card with a marker.

Then look at the whole—zoom out until you can see all the rows on the spreadsheet or layout the cards in order and stand back. **Where are the big gaps between important events?** That may be a point where the suspense is starting to wear thin—so take a careful look at those long stretches of unhighlightable scenes. Make sure they’re giving the reader something to look forward to, some reason to move on to the next scene—like a promise.

Promises

Promises are key to creating suspense. **Suspense is all about anticipation—and when we promise the reader some event, we put them in suspense.** You can add another column to your scene chart of promises made in a scene, and another for promises fulfilled. (In the example below, I used lettering to keep track of the promises, and rated the importance/tension of the promise on a scale of 1-10, to make things easier and keep track of the relative importance of the promise.)

Scene	Promise	Fulfilled
7	She'll meet him at dawn (D)—6	A fulfilled
8	–	C fulfilled
9	He'll kill her (E)—10	B delayed
10	–	D fulfilled; E denied

Note that not every promise we make must be fulfilled in the next scene, or the next time we come to it. In fact, **delaying promises, while reiterating that they're coming and how important they are, is a great way to increase the suspense.** (Plus, this handy chart makes sure we don't forget anything 😊 .)

Those in-between sections from the highlighting exercise can be a great place to look for these (since the important events are probably already setting up and fulfilling a number of promises). So **has it been a long time since we've seen any promises made, fulfilled, delayed or denied?**

Photo credit: [John Bounds](#)

Make sure parallels pack a punch for suspense

By parallels, I mean **scenes that repeat something from the previous ones**, or very recent scenes—the same character goal, level of tension, or even setting. Now, parallels can, of course, be used for good—but they can also be ignored ~~for evil~~ to our detriment.

Parallels for good

Within reason, parallels can show off recurring themes, symbols, and the importance of characters or settings. Well-chosen repetition draws attention to itself unobtrusively—it makes readers sit up and take notice without (“Hey, this is the third scene on the dock; what might that mean?”) without stopping the story.

Parallels to our detriment

On the other hand, parallels can be over done, or completely unintentional.

Scenes in the same setting can be repetitive, and may also be a sign that not enough is moving in the story. Maybe not, of course—you could have the whole thing take place inside a single room, but this may be one area to look at. As with the tension chart, we can **look at whether there’s another possible setting that might enhance the conflict** or add a new layer of meaning.

Scenes with the same character goal are often a sign that the character isn’t making enough progress. While we definitely don’t want to make things easy for our characters, watching a character fail repeatedly at the same thing wears down the suspense. We may begin not to care whether they’re going to succeed or not, unless each scene has high tension—or the character goal can be refined to relate to the specific events, conflict and disaster for that scene.

But probably most important are the **sections where the tension level doesn’t change** or varies only slightly for several scenes in a row. In [Writing Mysteries](#), one writer shared some advice from an editor: “I must not try to keep everything at high pitch all the way through a story. Excitement, if too steady, can be as boring as having nothing at all happening” (109).

One way to look at this visually is to use the tension rating from your scene chart. In most spreadsheet software, you can create a line graph from that column of data—Kaye Dacus calls this [an “EKG” for your story](#) (you know, an electrocardiogram? Like a heartbeat chart?).



Naturally, at the climax of a book, the tension will be quite high, probably for several scenes. But is the tension flat in there? Are there other “plateaus” or “plains”? Does the tension (or [promises](#)) start out much higher than it ends?

If the end isn't satisfying because it doesn't match the tension of the rest of the book, don't lower the suspense! **Fix the end!!** Change things up in plains and plateaus—if you can, add what looks like a reprieve, or a rest for a little bit before plunging them back into danger.

Photo credit: [Redvers](#)

Is it suspense or surprise?

Surprise and suspense might seem like polar opposites to be included in the same series. After all, one is all about making promises and putting off their fulfillment, while the other comes out of nowhere. But really, I think they're just **two ways of handling all the new information you'll give readers in a story**—and in some ways, they're just opposite ends of a spectrum.

You've got a huge event coming in your novel, and you have two choices. You can lead up to it with a lot of anticipation, promises, foreshadowing and/or dramatic irony—building suspense. Or you can throw your readers for a loop and just drop it on them (though at least a little foreshadowing is usually good here—hence the spectrum).

Alfred Hitchcock has famously explained the difference (emphasis added):

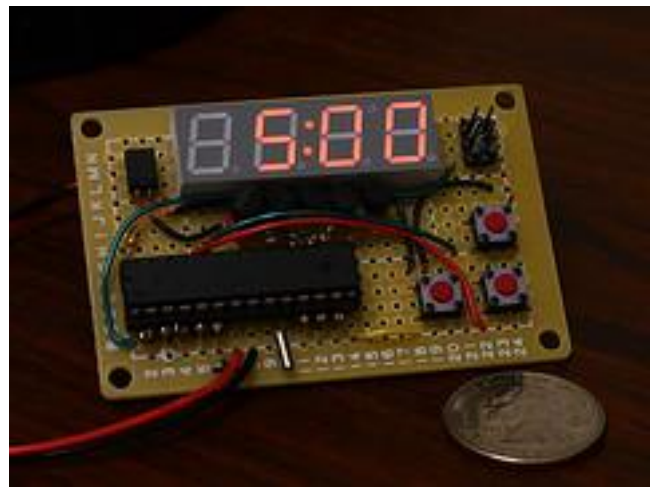
There is a distinct difference between 'suspense' and 'surprise', and yet many pictures continually confuse the two. I'll explain what I mean.

We are now having a very innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb

underneath this table between us. Nothing happens, and then all of a sudden, 'Boom!' There is an explosion. The public is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has seen an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence. Now, let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table, and the public knows it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock and there is a clock in the décor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene.

The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: 'You shouldn't be talking about such trivial matters. There's a bomb underneath you and it's about to explode!'

In the first case we have given the public fifteen seconds of surprise at the moment of the explosion. In the second case we have provided them with fifteen minutes of suspense. The conclusion is that whenever possible the public must be informed. Except when the surprise is a twist, that is, when the unexpected ending is, in itself, the highlight of the story.



—*Hitchcock* by François Truffaut, p 79-80, as quoted by [senses of cinema](#)

Not to disagree with my good friend Alfred, but **both surprise and suspense are important**. For major events and big promises, suspense is generally better. But for smaller events—especially things that don't need the extra explaining and won't live up to the level of suspense—surprise is a great thing.

If we lead up to all the events in a story, we run the risk of being too predictable. If we lead up to none of them, our readers are more likely to experience PTSD than suspense. One is probably better for your event and your story.

How do you determine whether your event should be a surprise or be used to create suspense? Hitchcock's guideline is a starting place: if it's a twist ending, surprise is pretty dang important. On the other hand, if that surprise would heighten the suspense throughout the book (without dragging it out too much) *and* if you can set it up for the audience to know without informing the characters, you could think about whether you could use the extra layer of suspense.

Conversely, **consider whether you spend too long building up to minor events**—what if you cut all the foreshadowing? Would the reader be slighted or delighted when the surprise is sprung?

Photo by [Jeremy Stanley](#)

Tension fix: cut to the chase

One of the ways that I've found to increase tension as I've read a bunch of craft books and reread my WIP is to **pull readers into scenes and create tension quickly**.

Our scene openings are really key in establishing tension early on. Many times, however, we spend the beginning of the scene "warming up"—rehashing the last scene or sequel, working up to a conflict or to a scene goal. Even after I'd edited specifically to make scene goals clear, I still found many scenes beginning with meandering until we found a conflict.



The first step *is* to **make our POV character's scene goal clear**. Often, that will be stated explicitly: she's waiting for her mystery date or he headed into the office to check on the Q4 numbers. (Thrilling.) Sometimes it'll be pretty darn clear from the way we ended the previous scene: the couple just had a fight, and now he's at a florist.

If the character's goal or purpose isn't early in the scene, we can risk losing our readers. And if we don't get those characters to work on those scene goals, we can risk losing our readers. And if those characters don't do something interesting—find a source of tension—pretty quick, we can risk losing our readers. (They're just fickle like that.)

I've said before that [conflict is at the heart of tension](#)—just as **conflict is at the heart of any fully-imagined scene**.

Once we've established the character's goal, explicitly or implicitly, we should bring on the conflict. Maybe he's headed to the florist but—the elevator's broken—the stairs are being painted. He twists his ankle getting down from the fire escape—the nearest florist is closed—he can't get a cab—he gets hit by the bus he's trying to catch. Notice that the conflict doesn't have to start huge—he doesn't have to jump straight to the disaster.

It doesn't even have to be big—maybe the florist doesn't carry her favorite kind of flowers, or after he pays, he remembers she's allergic. **But don't just leave him in there, pondering over whether to get daffodils or dianthus.**

Along with this, we can look at the whole scene to see what we can tighten. **Eliminate unnecessary or redundant words and use powerful, fast-paced language** instead. Check out this [tightening checklist](#) at the Ruby-Slippered Sisterhood for help.

Photo by [Matthias Rhomberg](#)

Tension fix: start with a bang

Above, I said “if the character’s goal or purpose isn’t early in the scene, we can risk losing our readers.” I believe that’s true—but at the same time, I recognize that **sometimes, it would make no sense for us to jump from the previous scene to the scene goal or start of the action** without motivating the POV character properly.

This is one of those times where **it’s vital to have a sequel**—a “scene” where we focus on the character’s emotional reaction to the action of a scene. Most of the time, we tack these onto the end of the appropriate scene—but that’s not always going to work. Say, for example, we were in Jimmy’s head for the confession scene and his sequel—he tells Gina that they really can be together. Then we move on to Gina tearing up all his letters. Huh?

We need a sequel in Gina’s perspective to clarify her motivation. But starting her scene with half a page (or more) of her emotions and thoughts in reaction to the last action is . . . well, slow. (Especially if we just saw Jimmy’s emotions and thoughts on the same subject.)



So how do we make the reader understand? **One great way to create tension is *not* to explain these actions**—at first. The reader is taken aback by this interesting or inexplicable action—and they’re eager to not only find out what happens next, but to learn why this is happening now.

As James Scott Bell says in [Revision And Self-Editing](#), **you can “marble in” this sequel information through the beginning of the scene**. As she rips up the letters, we have a natural reason for her to think about the last scene and to give us her response—and now we’re really compelled to find out.

This can be **effective within scenes**, too. I found a scene in my WIP where, halfway through, a minor character gave a two paragraph monologue to the hero to catch him (and us) up on her subplot. I’d interrupted the speech with the hero’s thought about the minor character’s habit to ramble, but still, the blocks of text were more than even I really wanted to read.

After she finished the speech, she went and retrieved a piece of evidence in a crime—a threat against her. I realized if I had the minor character **hand him that evidence first**, the readers would be pretty surprised—and *now* they want to know how she crossed the bad guys. Then her speech could keep the readers’ attention.

It can also be useful to [pick up the pace \(and increase suspense\)](#)—if a lot of our scenes are actually sequels, the story can slow down. If that’s not the appropriate pace for the story, **ending scenes with disasters and combining sequels with the beginning of the next scene can also help speed up the action of the story.**

Of course, this technique shouldn’t be used too often—**we don’t want our readers to get whiplash from all those head-fakes.** But it can be used to ramp up the tension at the beginning of a scene, and make the reader want to know about the emotional reaction that led the characters there.

What do you think? How do you handle necessary sequels? Do you use the “head-fake” explosion opening?

Photo by [Rob](#)

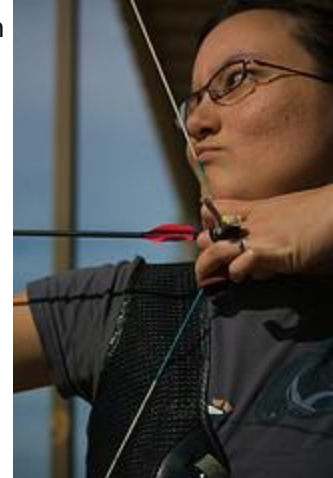
Tension fix: bring out internal conflicts

Sometimes, there's nothing wrong with the scene set up: we've put Mitch into a situation where he would be uncomfortable, unsure of himself, or required to perform a monumental feat. And yet somehow, the scene still doesn't get the reception we want. Critique partners note that **the scene—a turning point for the character—drags**.

We need this scene—so now what? Can't they see how this situation would be stressful and tense for Mitch? **Doesn't that automatically imbue the scene with tension?**

Uh, **no**. Not if we didn't put that there. Yeah, even though we'd all spent 300 pages together, if the feelings we know Mitch would have weren't on the page, readers won't see it.

Simply introducing more and more tension—more conflict—through the narration can increase the tension in a scene. If Mitch just sits there and takes this pivotal situation, the readers won't be engaged in his change—and it won't be as believable.



Camy Tang wrote an article about this, taken Donald Maass's "tension on every page" axiom to the next level—[tension in every line](#). She used a great before and after comparison of a cut scene from one of her novels—one without the "tension commentary" and one with (going for tension with a humorous tone).

Weaving in your character's emotions and observations—whether they're a "why me" comedic effect, a "not me!" suspense effect or a "can I do this" character effect—can help to increase the tension in a turning point scene.

But don't beat your readers over the head with it. If this is the fourth scene in a row where your protagonist is battling his Inner Demon, we readers are probably familiar enough that the conflict doesn't have to be mentioned in every paragraph. In fact, if this is the fourth scene in a row with the same inner conflict, it might be a good time to [see if all of those scenes are really necessary](#). Also, too much internal monologue can slow down the action of a scene, so **try for a balance**.

Photo by [Penguincakes](#)

Tension fix: boring but true—keeping the suspense while we give info

Sometimes, you just really **need to info dump**. The characters have made a discovery and must now explore its full significance—and if they don't, the readers are going to be totally lost.

Are you totally lost by the generalizations there? Let's try it this way: Indiana Jones and faithful sidekick Sallah finally get someone to examine the inscription on the medallion—but we know the Germans have already done so and are currently digging at the appointed spot. Basically, *we're watching someone watching someone reading something*. Yeah, the bad guys already have it—and they're using it. No tension. Audience nodding off.



In the [story conference for Raiders](#) (I can't believe I've never linked to this before; this is great stuff!), creator George Lucas, director Steven Spielberg and screenwriter Lawrence Kasdan came to the same conclusion. **They had to get this information to the audience**, and there didn't seem to be a better way to do it.

And then they hit on the solution. Do you remember? Maybe not. Without watching it again, all I remember is the German staff is the wrong height and—“**Bad dates.**” They added a situation in the background to enhance the tension—poisoned food which Indy comes perilously close to eating several times.

Mystery Man, in a column at the Story Department, talked about [this kind of exposition](#) (emphasis added):

*What's to be learned from this example? **Great exposition is always in the context of something else.** A scene should never be about exposition only. You should feed the exposition in the context of some other scenario that's going on in the scene whether its poisoned food that's eaten by a bad secret agent monkey or whether it's something else interesting going on between the characters, such as a contest of wills, a budding love story, or perhaps exposition that's being told to a secretly bad character who will use that information against the protagonists.*

This also requires **giving the audience more info**—a look into the kitchen, a scene where we see this character is really in cahoots with a major baddie. That kind of info can often be dramatized, of course, but this is another example of the “give the audience more information” philosophy that [Alfred Hitchcock pointed out created suspense](#). It's letting

the reader take a peek under the tablecloth or watch the baddies planting the bomb there, and suddenly, everything else they talk about is fraught with tension.

Mystery Man column via [Victoria Mixon](#); photo by [Yasmin & Arye Photographers](#)

Tension fix: dumpy dialogue

This is very related to the above point on [getting information in there while keeping the tension](#). Sometimes the dialogue that's used to convey that information is losing readers and we can't find any secret agent monkeys or secret bad guys to help out. (And sometimes the dialogue is just dull. Fix that first, and then see if the scene needs more tension.) Now what?

I'll turn the time over to two of the books I've been reading for this series: [Don't Murder Your Mystery](#) by Chris Roerden and [Revision And Self-Editing](#) by James Scott Bell.



Bell can start us off with a point we've [touched on](#): "Your Lead should be dealing with change, threat, or challenge from the get-go. At the very least, whenever she is in dialogue with another character, that **inner tension is present**" (97). Bringing out the inner conflicts can **add subtext to even the dullest small talk**. (But please, make sure that the small talk isn't so small that it can't support subtext 😊 .)

Roerden adds several techniques specifically for increasing tension in dialogue, since mysteries may require a lot of talky investigation. (And really, how many people would poison a PI's potato chips?) She mentions bypass dialogue, borrowed conflict, simulated disagreement and flat-out editing (179-184).

Bypass dialogue is when two characters speak but don't communicate. Naturally, this can be boring, but it can also be used to increase tension: make sure that the speakers have **opposing agendas and different priorities**, *even if they're friends*. ("Transforming allies into temporary adversaries not only increases tension but also builds the reader's empathy with your protagonist . . ." [180]).

You can also **borrow conflict from a background source** (a bit like the above fix). Roerden uses an example from a novel, a reporter interviewing a couple with a tennis game on TV in the background. When she asks about the victim, the husband suddenly swears. The reporter thinks she's onto something—but he's just upset about the game.

Simulated disagreement is a bit more tricky—obviously, the name refers to when two characters seem to disagree without actually doing so. In the example Roerden cites, two female



characters are trying to relate a creepy occurrence (which we've already seen dramatized) to a male third character. He has no real reason to disbelieve or oppose them, but he repeatedly interrupts them (increasing the tension) with stories of his own. One of the women (his wife), gets on his case for interrupting, further heightening the tension.

Finally, **flat-out editing** can help—especially for phone calls. (Eesh. I hate those!) Roerden uses the example of a phone call from a novel where the protagonist is in her car, realizing she needs to get a clue from her husband. She's already thought about the context—when they heard it, what bit of information it is exactly—so **why show that in a phone conversation?** Indeed, after the words "she called him," the author skips right to the husband's answer: "Yeah, I've got it right here. . ."

CLOSING CAUTION: Overusing any technique or tension fix can be gimmicky or hackneyed—and can actually undercut the tension. **Mix up your tension techniques** to keep your readers reading without getting bored.

Photo credits: fraying rope—[Govind Chakravarti](#); acorn hanging by a thread—[Karen Dorsett](#)

Suspense fixes

Fixing the suspense of a story can be a lot tougher than upping the tension in a single scene. Looking at suspense requires us to look at the big picture—and **increasing the tension in several scenes can increase the suspense**, too.

If you've gone back and fixed (or planned how to fix) the tension in several scenes, it might be time to reevaluate your suspense. Rerate your new scenes on tension and [redo the EKG](#). If you're really lucky, you may not have to do anything.



But then again, you might. Just as tension springs from conflict, **suspense is created by anticipation**. So the same things that fix scene tension might not fix story suspense.

Suspense is also harder to give general fixes for because it can be a lot more story-specific than tension problems (but I will offer a few 😊). Only you can tell what's right for your story (and even then, [we usually need help](#)). I can't just give the blanket "when in doubt, kill someone important," axiom because that might work for many stories, but if that's not going to be a focus of your story, it's more likely to distract and derail than help.

Take a good, hard look at the places you don't have anything major moving the story along. (Those [unhighlighted sections](#) of the scene chart.) You'll probably have to rethink some of those scenes. (I'm rethinking an entire quarter of my book.) **Be open to new ideas**—especially when you're doing other things. Be open to letting go of the things you worked so hard on.

That doesn't always mean you'll have to lose your favorite parts—but you may have to find very different ways to get them in there.

Photo credit: [Alex Schneider](#)

Suspense fix: raise the stakes

Although I came across this advice over and over again, I hadn't planned to include it. I thought it's covered in the [37 ways to build tension and suspense](#), and I didn't want to just list those again. But just mentioning "raise the stakes" probably isn't quite enough for how important this technique is.

Quite simply, **if the stakes aren't high enough in your book, other fixes may not be able to compensate.** If Grandmama's prized teacup poodle is the only one who's going to suffer if the bad guys win, other attempts at suspense and tension may seem forced. (Is Butch really going to pull a gun over Gigi?)

Donald Maass ([Writing the Breakout Novel](#), 59-80) and Noah Lukeman ([The Plot Thickens](#), 121-123) both specifically point to raising the stakes. In the suspense structure we looked at earlier, [establishing the stakes](#) was a crucial goal of Act I, as was [raising them in Act II](#).



So, how do we do that? Maass gives a few ways: establish a high value on human life (especially if this hero[ine] is going to have to kill), and create public and private stakes—ways in which the public at large and the characters on a personal level will suffer if they lose. In [Revision And Self-Editing](#), James Scott Bell also gives specific ways to raise those stakes:

- *Plot stakes: **brainstorm new ways things might go wrong for your Lead**—and push yourself. Go crazy; there are no bad ideas. Come up with at least 6 ideas.*
- *Character stakes [Maass's personal stakes]: **put the character into a dilemma.** Stick him between a rock and a hard place and make him choose. List all the reasons why he must take option B and why he shouldn't take option A—even though he needs to (and will) take option A. And/or **make it personal**—threaten or hurt the Lead, or better yet, someone they care about.*
- *Societal stakes [Maass's public stakes]: **How might society be hurt if things go wrong?** How can you show that, on a small scale or through extrapolation? (231-233).*



Finally, Noah Lukeman points out that **even seemingly small events can have big personal stakes**—he uses the example of getting the trash to the garbage truck in time. Not a major stressor for most of us, but if you've forgotten for the last three weeks, and your landlady's

going to evict you if you don't get that garbage out of your place, suddenly it matters.

So give Gigi a rest.

Photo credits: black poodle—[Rachel K](#); white poodle—[buhreee](#)

Suspense fix: arm the antagonist

Sometimes, suspense is low because the hero(ine)'s never really in danger. Not all stories require the hero to risk his life or the heroine to save the whole! world!, but, as Hitchcock said, "**The stronger the evil, the stronger the film**" (Traffaut 316). Or, you know, book.

This can be especially apparent in the middle of the book. James Scott Bell says "If your readers aren't worried about your Lead because the opponent or opposing circumstances are soft, the **middle will seem like a long slog indeed**" (229).

Naturally, we have to start with a [strong antagonist](#), well-matched to our Lead. That doesn't mean, of course, that the readers have to know who he is—most mysteries revolve around that revelation (whereas most suspense novels revolve around already knowing who he is—greater information, greater suspense. Thanks again, Hitchcock.). **We just have to know he's bad, he's dangerous, and he's after our Lead.**



We've talked about [The Complication of Act II](#) from [Fiction First Aid](#) by Raymond Obstfeld, because strong plotting methods include specific events to show our antagonists' strength. "In [Larry Brooks's Story Structure](#), for example, Act II contains two "[pinch points](#)" that are designed to raise the stakes by showing us just how bad the villain is. Even the [Mid-Point](#) is designed to help with this, showing the hero more to the story, changing the way he views the world."

James Scott Bell's [Revision And Self-Editing](#) gives more advice on better arming the antagonist, drawing on the "**three aspects of death**":

- *Does the opposition have the power to kill your Lead, like a mafia don, for instance?*
- *Does the opposition have the power to crush your Lead's professional pursuits, like a crooked judge in a criminal trial?*
- *Does the opposition have the power to crush your Lead's spirit? Think of the awful mother played by Gladys Cooper in the 1942 film [Now, Voyager](#). She has that power over her daughter, played by Bette Davis. (229)*

I especially like Bell's advice because it applies to more than just life-and-death suspense. Make sure as you arm your opposition that they don't become "a caricature," Bell warns—show their shades of gray. And if you end up making your opposition stronger than your Lead, **strengthen your Lead to match the villain** next.

Photo by [Jim Barker](#)

Suspense fix: cliffhangers

As I defined the terms at the beginning of this series, tension works within a scene to keep us reading, while suspense is the “suprascenic” feature that keeps us reading after a scene closes. So sometimes, the way to keep people reading is as simple as **examining how you end each scene**, and especially each chapter.

I’ve made this part of the [scene chart](#)—a column where I indicate whether the scene ends on a hook, a segue or a note of closure. The “segue” means that it’s a lead-in to the next scene; the “closure” means that I wrap things up neatly for that character and situation—nothing more to see here, folks. Move along.



To build suspense, avoid the closure ending—especially at chapter breaks, where a reader is most likely to set down your story. As author [Katie Ganshert](#) has said, “**End each chapter in a state of unbalance.**”

Katie also listed a number of ways to do this:

We could stop in the middle of the action. Find an enticing hook. Foreshadow things to come. . . .

Consider cutting the last paragraph. The last line. The last page. Whatever you need to do to end each chapter on a note of unbalance. A sense that things aren’t well. Make your reader’s stomach squirm and propel them to the next page so they can slay the uncomfortable beast taking root in their bellies.

Related to this is cliffhangers within a scene or chapter. In [Fiction First Aid](#), Ray Obstfeld calls this creating a “**suspense pocket**” (47). You set up a promise—like someone receiving a letter from someone unknown. Rather than fulfilling the promise immediately and have the character open it right away, try throwing in an event or two that delays that fulfillment. (This can also be characterization or setup, and can [make readers pay attention to what would otherwise be a boring scene](#).)

One caveat: **change up the kind of unbalance** (and length, for the suspense pocket). Katie’s advice is absolutely excellent—but if we take it to mean that all of our chapter endings come in the middle of a scene, right before a major disaster, it’s going to feel repetitive and forced. Don’t always end in the middle of a scene, or end on a line of foreshadowing worthy of Howard-Shore-John-Williams-dramatic-music-swell (*Little did we know, we’d never be the same* at the end of every chapter).

Really—I read a book (four, actually, in a series) that did this on every chapter it seemed, and it was *so obnoxious*. Not just because I couldn't stop reading in the middle of the chapter, but because **it felt like the cheap trick it was**. (Every chapter ended on a “hook” all right—one that was resolved in the first paragraph of the next chapter, because it was actually still part of the same scene.) Still liked the books, of course, but I'm still annoyed about that.

Photo by [spaceodyssey](#)

Suspense fix: stack promises

Earlier, I recommended [assessing your story's suspense](#) taking a **look at the promises** you were making and fulfilling. The example assessment I used (completely made up, of course) showed a list of promises made in various scenes, tracking their progress in subsequent scenes (whether they were fulfilled, delayed or denied). Just so you don't have to click through again, here you go:

Scene	Promise	Fulfilled
7	She'll meet him at dawn (D)—6	A fulfilled
8	—	C fulfilled
9	He'll kill her (E)—10	B delayed
10	—	D fulfilled; E denied

We have a number of **simultaneous, conflicting promises building** here—a great set up for suspense. But it's the last scene here that got me thinking. In that scene, apparently, we're fulfilling her promise of meeting him at dawn, and obviously not fulfilling his promise to kill her. Really, this shouldn't say that there are no promises made here—we should **use the fulfillment of a promise to introduce a new, bigger promise**.

Those two promises kept us in suspense, and we've now released that anticipation if he just decides, "Oh, I won't kill her after all. She seems kinda nice." The suspense level (and probably tension, too) bottoms out.

Instead of just letting it go, we can **use this opportunity to add a new promise**—since both of those characters have fulfilled or lost their promises, they need a new one to keep us in suspense. It doesn't always have to come in the same scene, but it had better come pretty quick.

I'm planning to use this myself in my next round of revisions. I spend a while foreshadowing (aka promising and creating anticipation) a meeting between two characters. If they met and were glad/mad/sad to see one another, that lowers the suspense level for their storyline. That release can damage the suspense in my story—or I can **channel the previous suspense into a new, related promise**. Now character Z has to get character Q to do something, or his whole plan—and maybe their lives—could be in jeopardy.

Surprise fix: telegraphing the pass (or not)

Early on in the series, [Deb Salisbury](#) left a [blog comment](#) that's worth discussing (or "foreblogging," as I've heard it):

Sigh. I foreshadow until I'm afraid of telegraphing, but my crit partners complain about not seeing the surprise coming. I'm doing something wrong. =}

Perhaps, perhaps not, Deb. I've been there, too. (If one critique partner pegs the killer by page 30 and another says that the surprise reveal was unfulfilling because it wasn't foreshadowed, which one is right?) Naturally, there are detriments to foreshadowing too heavily.

In basketball, if you telegraph your pass you risk having your ball stolen. Instead of the ball game, in writing you risk losing your reader if you make things too obvious.

I watched a movie recently where every time a "little fact" was mentioned, I could see the plot twist they thought they were "foreshadowing." ("I don't swim," says one character. I called it—she was going to fall out of the boat and the lead would have to save her. Took about 30 minutes to get there.) Maybe I've just seen too many movies and thought about these things too much, but **total predictability is definitely not our goal as writers.**

Or, to go back to our basketball analogy: a no-look pass is notoriously hard to defend.

So, **what's the writing equivalent of a no-look pass?** I don't think a reader has to see a surprise coming. But I think that **once the surprise is sprung, readers should be able to remember (ideally) or go back and find the clues** you've been planted along the way.

In [The Plot Thickens](#), Noah Lukeman gives one example of setting up a surprise—specifically, a secret:

*For the secret to be used for suspenseful effect, we have to know there **is** a secret; Norman Bates's mother is alluded to in shadowy fragments; in [Casablanca](#) Ilsa flat out reveals there is something she cannot tell Rick; in the whodunits, we know from the long looks the staff exchange with each other that someone is not saying something. (137)*

Conversely, some surprises don't actually have to be heavily foreshadowed: if you really can't foreshadow because none of the POV characters have enough information or interactions to come across foreshadowing, or if the surprise is a complicating incident of a level of conflict.

Again, **predictability is not a virtue in most storytelling**. It's not a bad thing to surprise your readers. But it *is* a delicate balance with foreshadowing and betrayal. Make sure your readers have all the pieces your characters do—but beating your readers over the head with the coming surprise is a good way to ruin it.

Why suspense?

Why are suspense, tension and surprise all so important? We've established that suspense and tension draw the readers along through your story, and compel them to keep reading. But it's **more than just making readers read**, and rewarding them (with surprise sometimes)—it's making them *want* to read your book (and your next one).



James Scott Bell highlights one reason why these elements are so important: "Modulating tension is one of the keys to writing fiction" ([Revision And Self-Editing](#), 82). We started off our series with a quote from agent Noah Lukeman: "**Suspense, more than any other element, affects the immediate, short term experience of the work**" ([The Plot Thickens](#), 119).

But Lukeman further explains why being conscious of tension and suspense are so important:

*The presence of suspense is . . . a feat and shows promise, since it indicates that **the writer is writing more for the reader than for himself.** (120)*

I think it's easy—and for many of us, important—to draft for ourselves. I'm told Stephen King says you should **write the first draft "with the door closed"**—with little to no input or interference from others, so that you can get out the story you're trying to tell. Remember the delight, the way you relish the scenes that you've been waiting for your whole book long?

But when we're ready to open that door, to share your writing with an eye to improving it, it's not about what you loved writing and what you still love reading anymore. It's about what someone else—an agent, an editor, a customer in a bookstore—will love reading, what will suck them in and drag them on a relentless, compelling journey with your characters. Focusing on the experience of your readers shows that you're not just in it to entertain yourself and a few friends—**you're here to tell a story, to get people reading—to entertain.**

Photo credit: [Aart von Bezooyen](#)

37 ways to keep readers' pulses racing—and keep them reading

There are lots of “tricks” and techniques to get the “**tension in every page**” Donald Maass recommends. While I don't really go in for resorting to tricks to create suspense, little techniques can really establish, increase or build the tension within a scene.

The list:

1. Give a character a goal in each scene
2. **Setbacks to a character's goal** in a scene
3. Uncertainty—often from a lack of information
4. Worry—plenty of bad information
5. Doubt, especially in one's self (the character, not the writer 😊)
6. **Raise the stakes**—put more people or a bigger, more valuable objective in danger
7. Increase the odds against the character
8. Make the characters care more—greater emotional stakes
9. Make things more challenging
10. Surprise character or event to change things up
11. Nonhuman obstacles—setting or weather interfere
12. Using the POV of a character that doesn't know something vital (something we've established in another POV)
13. End the scene with a foreboding foreshadowing
14. Play on a character's inner anxieties—push them to the limit (and beyond)
15. **Let the characters blow up**—what are the consequences?
16. “Mini-disaster”—a preview of what could happen in the big disaster, by showing a small version of their impending doom.
17. A close call
18. A character purposefully withholding info from another
19. Jump cutting to another scene/storyline immediately after a disaster
20. Make characters' goals look impossible. Or just **make them impossible**.
21. Stating a chilling fact.
22. Danger—dangerous, skillful work.
23. Deadlines approaching
24. Foreshadowing a **coming confrontation**
25. An unfortunate meeting
26. Trapped in a closed environment (perhaps a crucible?)
27. Fears coming true
28. Set up any of these situations and **prolong them**, rather than relieving the tension



29. Remove characters' supports
30. Disable characters' strengths
31. Undermine characters' belief systems (not necessarily in a religious sense, but in a "I'm fighting for the greater good—holy crap, what do you mean the victim's a bad guy?" kind of way)
32. **Move up the deadline**
33. Avoid low-tension scenes (sequels, really):
 1. Thinking (esp while driving between one scene with live action and another)
 2. Decompressing or cleaning up
 3. Coffee breaks
 4. "Aftermath" scenes
 5. Sometimes, even love scenes—a sex scene releases all the sexual tension you've established, so then you have to *reestablish* that tension with something to keep them apart. Though this can be done well, often, this is where we get the contrived or entirely external conflicts that just aren't that compelling.
34. Leave out the parts people skip 😊 —distill scenes to their essential parts
35. Cut small talk (unless you've worked hard to establish that the small talk is covering something else, something with a lot of tension, or you've got a lot of subtexting)
36. Make one character's scene goal conflict with another's scene goal
37. Make us root for the other guy—**make the antagonist a [sympathetic character](#)**, so we want both sides to win.



Sources: [Revision And Self-Editing](#) by James Scott Bell, [Stein On Writing](#) by Sol Stein, [Writing the Breakout Novel](#) by Donald Maass, and me, of course.

Photo credits: nail biter—[Cavale Doom](#); knuckled grip—[Alex Schneider](#)