

KEEP THE PAGES TURNING: MAXIMIZING SUSPENSE IN YOUR NOVEL

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Workshop plan: Five concepts to increase suspense. Stakes, Ticking clocks, Cliffhangers, Secrets, Stretching the tension

Suspense: *A feeling or state of nervousness or excitement caused by wondering what will happen* (Britannica)

The key is anticipation. “As novelists, we should ask or imply a question at the beginning of the story, then we should delay the answer.” –Lee Child.

Example, opening lines of *The Wife* by Meg Wolitzer: “The moment I decided to leave him, the moment I thought, *enough*, we were thirty-five thousand feet above the ocean, hurtling forward but giving the illusion of stillness and tranquility. *Just like our marriage*, I could have said, but why ruin everything right now?”

Surprise vs suspense: Fifteen seconds of surprise vs fifteen minutes of suspense (paraphrasing Alfred Hitchcock about movies). Example: *And Then There Were Four* by Nancy Werlin.

1. What’s at Stake? Must be an issue critical to the main character and not easily solved. Need obstacles and anticipation before a solution. Main character can’t just walk away. Examples: *The Silence of Murder* by Dandi Daley Mackall, *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang, *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanh Hà Lai.

Raising the Stakes: “The writer's job is to get the main character up a tree, and then once they are up there, throw rocks at them.” –Vladimir Nabokov. “Rocks” must be relevant. Examples: *The Silence of Murder* by Dandi Daley Mackall, *One Wrong Word* by Hank Phillippi Ryan

How can the situation become worse? How can “options become constrained?” –Charlie Jane Anders, *Never Say You Can’t Survive: How to Get Through Hard Times by Making Up Stories*.

2. Ticking Clocks. Adds a time constraint. The main character (MC) has limited days to solve the problem.

- A disaster will strike in hours and kill everyone unless...
- Summer or a trip or an event will end
- Another murder will occur (*Criminal Minds* series, *Fatal Intrusion* by Jeffery Deaver and Isabella Maldonado)
- A wedding is scheduled to take place
- Evidence (or the real killer) must be found before the trial ends and verdict is decided
- Unknown countdown: 136 days before. 128 days before. Before what? (*Looking for Alaska* by John Green)

3. Cliffhangers. Introduce complication, emotional uncertainty. Creating a “springboard” launches the reader into the next chapter—Isabella Maldonado (International Thriller Writers interview).

Example of springboard: *Fatal Intrusion* by Maldonado and Deaver. At the end of chapter thirty, two MCs are driving when a white van suddenly blocks their lane:

There was a moment of stillness, and then the van’s driver and front passenger threw open their doors, each of them putting one foot on the ground.

“What are they—?”

Sanchez never had a chance to finish the comment. Both men raised weapons, one a pistol, the other an assault rifle, and opened fire.

Chekhov’s gun: “One must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it.”

Example: *Allegedly*, Tiffany D. Jackson. Chapter five ends on a moment of tension, raises the stakes, and creates further obstacles:

“You don’t have that lawyer anymore, Mary. You have the state. That’s it. . . . You want a lawyer, then get one. See what you can afford with that allowance of yours.”

My stomach bubbles. I’m screwing this all up.

“Can you just talk to my momma? She knows what really happened.”

“What do I look like, a detective?”

“But she knows the truth.”

“Mary, I—”

“Please!”

Winters pauses to stare at me, pleading. He takes a long, tired old man sigh.

“I’ll . . . see what I can do.”

I think that means no.

I head back to my room and the girls are all quiet. My sheets are in the hallway again. But this time there are holes cut in them; my flat sheet is a slice of Swiss cheese. Someone must have heard me talking to Winters. That doesn’t bother me. What bothers me is who else has a knife in here besides me.

Example of chapter end in verse: *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo, “*Telephone*.”

Twin doesn’t ask who I’m texting.

Though I know he’s wondering

because I’m wondering who he’s been texting, too.

The reason why he’s smiling more now.

And giggles in the dark,

the glow of his phone letting me know

we both have secrets to keep.

Analyzing chapter ends: *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins.

Ch 1: Katniss's sister chosen (inciting incident).

Ch 2: Peeta chosen. Remembers his kindness, but he has to die for her to survive (complication).

Ch 3: Adviser/Haymitch is drunk (worry).

Ch 4/5: Katniss/Peeta (distrust).

Ch 6: At end of day, sees girl who tried to escape from the Capitol (concern, even though going to sleep).

Ch 7: Shoots apple on Gamemakers' table (power, possible repercussions).

Ch 8: Separate coaching for Peeta (betrayal).

Ch 9: Peeta's interview. End of part one. (Games begin end of ch 10.)

Chapter endings as art, not science. *The Hunger Games*, pages 130-133. Where in the following section does Collins end chapter 9/part one?

Peeta sighs. "Well, there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember. But I'm pretty sure she didn't know I was alive until the reaping."

... "So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She can't turn you down then, eh?" says Caesar encouragingly.

"I don't think it's going to work out. Winning . . . won't help in my case," says Peeta.

"Why ever not?" says Caesar, mystified.

Peeta blushes beet red and stammers out. "Because . . . Because . . . She came here with me."

For a moment, the cameras hold on Peeta's downcast eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see my face, mouth half open in a mix of surprise and protest, magnified on every screen as I realize, *Me! He means me!* ...

"Oh, that is a piece of bad luck," says Caesar ... "She didn't know?"

Peeta shakes his head. "Not until now."

... "Well best of luck to you, Peeta Mellark, and I think I speak for all of Panem when I say our hearts go with yours."

4. Secrets

Reader knows?	MC knows?	
NO	NO	Reader and MC learn secret at the same time. Often used in mysteries/thrillers in general, especially single POV, along with other stories that have twists. Examples: Noodle Shop Mystery series by Vivien Chien, Alphabet series by Sue Grafton, <i>The Astonishing Color of After</i> by Emily X.R. Pan, <i>When No One is Watching</i> by Alyssa Cole.
YES	NO	Multiple POVs. <i>The Wedding Singer</i> (movie), <i>None of This is True</i> by Lisa Jewell, <i>Fatal Intrusion</i> by Jeffery Deaver and Isabella Maldonado.
NO	YES	Unreliable narrators and/or stories with secrets the character reveals that are a surprise to the reader. <i>Allegedly</i> by Tiffany D. Jackson, <i>The Wife</i> by Meg Wolitzer.
YES	YES	“Our delight comes from knowing what the protagonist is holding back and why; we revel in the tension between what’s she’s saying and what we know she’s really thinking about” – <i>Wired for Story</i> by Lisa Cron. <i>Die Hard</i> (movie), <i>One Summer’s Night</i> by Caridad Pineiro, <i>Pandemic</i> by Yvonne Ventresca, <i>Yellowface</i> by R.F. Kuang, <i>Burn Baby Burn</i> by Meg Medina.

(There can also be combinations of these scenarios within a novel.)

5: Stretching the Tension

Give the reader a chance to anticipate by slowing down time in a vivid way, particularly for key scenes.

- Try to use active voice instead of passive. Find passive voice clues: to be, are, is, was, has, had, etc. Change to active with strong verbs.

It was a rainy afternoon./The rain hammered the roof.
The cat’s fur had dirt on it./Dirt covered the cat’s fur.

(RESOURCE: Passive vs Active Voice, Candace Osmond, grammarist.com)

- Try to avoid filtering verbs that create distance for the reader, including saw, heard, felt, knew, realized, wondered, understood, thought.

She saw the lost pit bull./The pit bull wandered into the street alone.
He heard them arguing./Their angry words shattered the silence.

(RESOURCE: Weak Word Checklist by K.M. Allan, kmallan.com)

- Include relevant sensory details.
- Add interiority -- character thoughts. (Tell vs show vs include the emotions behind the actions.)

Example: *Dealing in Dreams* by Lilliam Rivera

The weight of her absence hits me. On most nights when my crew and I patrol the streets of Mega City, I feel a sense of invincibility mixed with glee. . . . Not tonight. We're missing one of our girls, and the warm breeze that blankets my face is a trick meant to seduce me into thinking everything is fine.

Example: *Burn Baby Burn* by Meg Medina

Suddenly Hector turns to me. I can read his face, burning with rage. With one sweeping motion, he topples the stereo and all our music. He kicks a chair that goes spinning across the room at Mima. Then he starts in my direction.

I don't wait.

I fly down the stairs as Mima tries to block the door. . . .

But in no time, he's close behind. I'm tackling the steps three at a time, but Hector's legs are longer.

He's close enough for me to hear his labored breath at my back. He grabs at my hair at last and drags me back painfully. I'm lifted off the step, and then, with a sudden shove forward, I go sailing through the air. The floors in this building are old marble, cold and hard. I grab frantically for the rail to save myself.

“The problem of readers being bored isn't solved by adding action but instead by adding apprehension.” –Steven James

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