

**Tip #18. Tension headaches**

Tension is the lifeblood of just about every story out there, from thrillers and horrors to whodunnits and romantic comedies. And by 'tension' we're talking about your reader's mental state not your character's! It matters little if your main character is sweating bullets before asking a girl out on a date, but his clumsy dithering leaves your reader yawning.

In a nutshell, tension is the drug that keeps readers turning the pages. Without it, your story will slip from your reader's thoughts and probably their hands as well.

Ideally, if it could be depicted as a graph from start to finish, tension would look something like a rising stock market index. A series of peaks and troughs displaying an overall upward trajectory, until the climax, when the tension is released. The troughs are every bit as important as the peaks and represent 'breathers' or moments of pause when the reader is allowed to catch their breath before the next emotional spike. Indeed, it is the juxtaposition of these peaks and troughs which creates tension in its' own right. Without these troughs, rising tension would soon become unsustainable and ineffective, like an elastic band that has been stretched too far and loses all elasticity.

By incorporating this jagged pattern of rising tension throughout your story, from chapters to scenes to dialogue, you stand the best chance of keeping your reader engaged.

So, how does one load up on tension in a story? This subject has occupied writers since the dawn of time and many techniques have been employed over the years. How many you ask? Nobody can say for sure. Certainly, too many to mention here. In fact, this paragraph itself represents one such technique. That of 'avoidance' or 'stringing' the reader along! Although, admittedly it's a rather weak technique and there are far better ways out there, such as:

1. Getting the reader emotionally invested in your character.

The reader who does not care about your characters, good and bad, will not get tense no matter what you throw at them.

2. Raising the stakes

In the words of Ian Irvine "You can either raise the prize for succeeding, or raise the price of failure – or, preferably, both at the same time."

A common maxim encapsulating this idea is that of "out of the frying pan into the fire." In other words, your character tries to rectify the situation but ends up making things worse.

3. Create Character Conflict

This goes without saying when it comes to the protagonist versus antagonist battle, but character conflict between 'allies' is also incredibly effective at raising tension. It's worth noting that conflict does not only have to be external, i.e. between characters. It can also be internal, where a character wrestles with his demons and makes a poor decision for instance.

4. Make use of Cliff-hangers

But avoid ending your story on one! This will in all likelihood leave your reader frustrated and unsatisfied. Cliff-hangers seem to work best at chapter endings but it's also important to 'resolve' the cliff-hanger shortly after you've introduced it. Too

much distance between event and resolution and your reader will forget all about it. Worse, your next cliff-hanger will probably be treated with disdain.

5. Order your chapters and scenes in the best possible way to maximise the feeling of rising tension.

Quite often a simple reshuffling of sequence can have a positive impact. The best way I've found to do this involves making use of Microsoft Excel. I capture my scenes in a single sentence and list them one below the other. Then I play around with the order. By highlighting a row, holding shift and then 'clicking and dragging', the highlighted row can be moved around.

The five techniques listed here are just the tip of the iceberg and there are plenty of other techniques out there. With today's increasingly visual audiences, it's always worth taking note of which techniques they employ in that medium, but don't be afraid to get creative yourself.

Till next time...feel the tension!