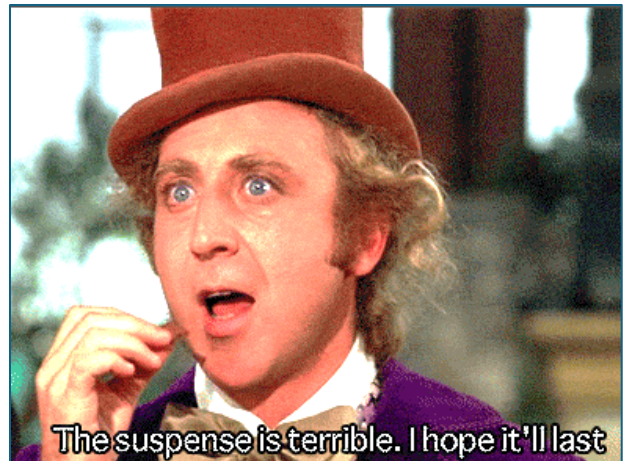


THE UN-PUT-DOWN-ABLE BOOK: Writing Suspense with Ellen Sallas

- **SUSPENSE, MORE THAN ANY OTHER ELEMENT, AFFECTS THE IMMEDIATE SHORT-TERM EXPERIENCE OF THE WORK.** Even with undeveloped characters, weak journeys, and a hackneyed plot, if suspense exists, the reader can hardly set it down. They might walk away resentful, they may immediately forget it, but for those few hours, they were hooked.

When used improperly, the writer creates characters and circumstances to conform to suspenseful situations, instead of the suspense arising naturally from the characters and the circumstances themselves. Suspense becomes the destination when it should rather be an adjunct to the journey.

- **YOU CAN WRITE IT.** Suspense may seem like something impossible to “learn to write”, but it’s simply another part of your journey to perfecting your craft.
- **SUSPENSE IS UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED.** All cultures, all walks of life, it is part of the human experience.
- **SUSPENSE IS ABOUT ANTICIPATION.** It is about what we do *not* have and what has *not* happened. **It is about the process of watching events unfold.**



While a victim is stalked, a girl is courted, a deadline approaches: suspense looms. In short, **suspense is about creating and then prolonging this anticipation.**

- **SUSPENSE COMPRISES DOZENS OF ELEMENTS THAT BUILD UPON EACH OTHER IN SUCCESSION.** Begin with the creation of anticipation. They may stand alone, but combining and stacking these elements builds excellent suspense.

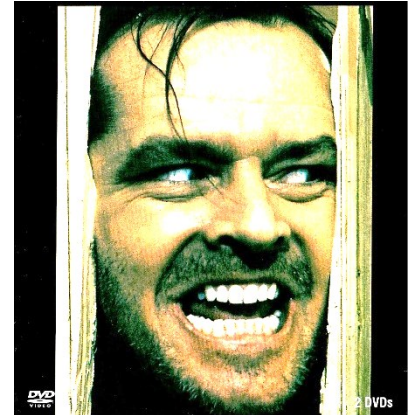
10 Methods of CREATING ANTICIPATION

1. **THE OBJECTIVE:** Have an objective or destination in mind for your character.
A killer sitting in a room by himself is not nearly as suspenseful as a killer chasing a victim. A jogger idling in the corner is not as suspenseful as a jogger racing to the finish of a marathon. **The killer and the jogger need objectives.** Once they have them, we suddenly want to know if they will achieve them. **Anticipation begins.**
2. **RAISE THE STAKES:** Now that you have your objective, one way to build suspense is to raise the stakes. One way to raise the stakes is to increase the importance of the objective.
Example: Your character is taking out the garbage. *No suspense.*

OR: Your character is taking out the garbage, and the garbage man only picks up once a week and is honking his horn. The character has missed the pickup three weeks in a row and his tiny hallway is filled with foul-smelling garbage. His landlady is going to evict him if he misses the garbage again. The garbage truck is revving its engine. He honks one more time, and it looks like he's about to leave. The stakes are raised, and our character taking out the garbage suddenly has become suspenseful. He breaks into a run. Will he make it? Will he be evicted?

Note: as the writer, you must establish the stakes. How badly does he want to avoid being evicted? **Have your pieces in place before the truck arrives so the suspense is born of the character himself.**

3. **DANGER:** Danger is a powerful way to increase suspense. Example: your character has an objective to swim across a river. Let's say, the stakes are high - if he doesn't make it, he won't be able to journey on with his peers. So far, this is moderately suspenseful. You could add danger. The river is filled with hungry crocodiles and dangerous currents, 90% of the people who try to cross this river don't make it, the army is chasing him, so if he doesn't try, he'll be shot. **Suspense has been increased by adding danger.**



Note there are different types of danger.

- **Sexual danger.** *A pretty woman walks in a dangerous neighborhood and we wonder if she'll be assaulted.*
- **Medical danger.** *An illness or a contagious disease has attacked the character.*
- **Emotional or psychological danger.** *As in a child or vulnerable person being abused.*
- **Spiritual danger.** *A character is being dragged into a world of murderers and is becoming one himself.*
- **Your character.** Suspense can come from your character if he is the antagonist. In such cases you have nonstop tension because everywhere your character goes, he causes stress, the reader knows what he's capable of and never knows when he's going to strike.

4. **TIME LIMITS** add suspense. A student taking a test is not suspenseful. A student taking a test and he only has 5 minutes, and if he does not pass he will fail and his entire family will lose their house (raised stakes) because they were depending on this his scholarship to keep them vital... A clock doesn't have to literally be ticking but if the reader knows there's only a week, a month, year, depending on the circumstance.

5. **INABILITY TO TAKE ACTION.** One of the most powerful forms of suspense comes when a character has an important objective but is unable to take action.

Example. A killer approaches a woman from across the street, she fumbles with her keys and she can't get her door open. He's getting closer. Our hearts pound.

This also applies if the character is unable to take action for someone else. Think *Rear Window*, classic Alfred Hitchcock, protag watching a crime take place but because he is crippled he can

not act. How about *The Dead Zone*, Stephen King, where the protagonist can see the future but is unable to get anyone to believe him, thus he can't help them.

6. **THE UNKNOWN.** Say your character has to enter a basement. *No suspense.* But if your character knows that there is something frightening possibly in the basement, and he is forced to go down there to check it out for reasons relating to the plot, he gropes his way along into the dark. Somebody grabbed his leg! The reader jumps! Why? There is nothing more terrifying than the unknown.
7. **SEXUAL TENSION.** Sexual tension can create one of the most powerful forms of suspense, it can carry the work and make up for little else happening. But every romance still needs suspense, or they will become a staid and boring work. How do you create suspense in romance? *Forbidden romance* is the most effective.

The most important thing to remember is that **suspense disappears when the courtship is consummated** and the lovers are happy. To keep suspense, the writer must prolong the courtship as long as possible or have the lovers break away so he can bring them back together again.

8. **DRAMATIC IRONY.** Dramatic irony is when the readers are privy to something that the characters are not, often something that is about to affect them. Think *Jaws*.

A young couple swimming happily and flirting with each other in the ocean. A shark approaches; the couple is unaware. It is not suspenseful for the characters, but it is for the reader. Dramatic irony is powerful because it involves the audience and makes them want to scream out a warning.

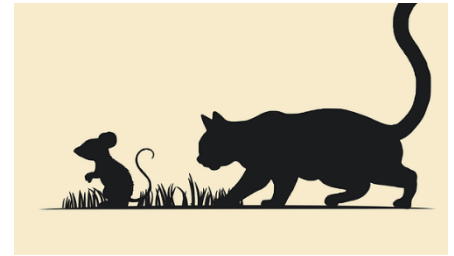


9. **LACK OF RESOLUTION.** When the character wants to do something and is repeatedly prevented from doing so, suspense is created. Let's say a man comes home excited eager to tell his wife some good news, but the doorbell rings. He has to wait. They get rid of that annoyance, and he tries again and the phone rings. The phone call is ended, and he tries a third time, and the children awaken or some emergency arises; the whole time, the reader desperately wants the woman to hear his great news. Suspense has been created.
10. **THE SECRET.** If properly used, the secret can create enough suspense to propel the entire work. *Whodunits* thrive on secrets. Who is the killer? So do romances. Who is she sleeping with? What is she holding back from him? In *Casablanca*, the secret Ilsa holds back from Rick is used to stretch suspense from the beginning to the end. In *Psycho*, the truth about Norman Bates's mother is kept secret until the penultimate scene. If we had known the truth in the beginning the film would not have been nearly as suspenseful.

BE CAREFUL because “the secret” is a rather obvious ploy and can be gimmicky or seem contrived. Make sure your secret complements other layers of suspense and does not stand alone.

EXERCISES

- 1. Raise the stakes.** Make a list of the characters in your work. For each character ask:
What is at stake for this person? What is your character's source of desperation, and can you bring it out? Look at the major events in your work. What traits can you give your character that will help add suspense to these scenes? Or conversely, look at your character's traits. What major events can you write that will play on these traits for maximum effect? What is his chief objective? What will happen if he does not achieve this objective? What will he gain if he does? Will it change his day or change his life? How can you raise the stakes?
- 2. Suspense rating.** How much of a priority have you given suspense in your work? Is it in every scene or is it safe to the end? To the beginning? Go through your list of chapters and on a scale of one to 10, rate each chapter suspense factor. Are some chapters more suspenseful than others? Why or why not? How can you make less suspenseful characters more suspenseful? How can you make the suspenseful characters more suspenseful? If suspense is not pervasive, what makes you think you can do without it? Are you making other aspects of your work, characters, dialogue, action, overcompensate? If your work is low on suspense, find the few areas where it is suspenseful. How can you expand on these?
- 3. Prolonging suspense.** Go through your list of suspenseful scenes and ask yourself how you can prolong each of these. As an exercise, take a suspenseful scene and make it twice the length, stretching out the suspenseful moment. If it is one page, make it two. Two pages, make it four. You can cut it back later when it's done. What have you added by doing this?
- 4. The unresolved.** Take each suspenseful scene in your work and find a way to turn it into two full-fledged scenes. Find a way to end the first scene so that it is unresolved, compelling the reader to come back to it at some other later point in the work. You have now doubled the number of successful scenes in your work. Can you apply this technique to any actual chapters? To the end of the work?



Note from the presenter, Ellen Sallas. I have used these exercises myself and have enjoyed many reviews from readers regarding the “un-put-downable nature” of my fiction. The material for this workshop was gleaned from the resource below. I recommend you read the entire book; it has helped me in every aspect of fiction writing. *THE PLOT THICKENS, EIGHT WAYS TO BRING FICTION TO LIFE*, Noah Lukeman, St. Martin's Press, New York, NY, 2002

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