

One-Page Insights: Building Tension

In the plots of commercial “page-turner” fiction, tension is everything. However, every story (long or short, fiction or nonfiction) needs some tension to keep the reader engaged. You don’t have to create high-stakes scenarios on every page—tension may be subtle, too—but for the tension to be successful, you must create characters readers care about.

Broadly, there are three types of tension, and a story might include all three in its main plot or subplots:

1. Personal: protagonist vs. their own demons/flaws/trauma
2. Relational: protagonist vs. antagonist(s) or other key characters (such as a love interest)
3. Survival: protagonist vs. external threat (war, nature/disaster, aliens, etc.)

Remember: Tension can be fun! Think of the sexual tension in romance stories, for example.

Pacing

Pacing is important to tension. Think about what obstacles your protagonist will face and begin small, layering on more challenges and raising the stakes as the story builds to its climax.

In action-packed dramas, give your reader the occasional breather with low-key scenes. In more sedate stories, periodically raise readers’ pulses with an intense scene.

A Few Tools

- **The ticking clock:** A race against time is always an effective way to create tension.
- **High-octane action scenes:** A chase, an escape, a fight, a killing ... and so on.
- **Slow-burn scenes:** Nail-biting scenes in which tension mounts slowly to an explosive climactic point.
- **Cliff hangers:** End key scenes leaving the reader fearing for your protagonist.
- **Ignorance:** Tension is often raised if the reader knows something that the character doesn’t.
- **Suspense:** Withhold information until the time is right.
- **Twists and revelations:** A surprising turn of events can raise tension quickly, especially if you’ve lulled your reader into a false sense of security.