



TENSION IN ACTION

BY TD STORM

FOUR MINI-LESSONS ON CREATING
TENSION IN STORIES

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TENSION



In this short instructional booklet, I give you some very practical tips on how to create more tension in your stories. Without tension, your story will fall flat. It doesn't matter what kind of story you're writing—whether it's a psychological thriller, a character-centered fantasy, a realist family-drama memoir—all stories live or die by tension.

Tension is, in short, the main unit of reader engagement. You'll find four mini-lessons here, demonstrating **how successful stories have used replicable story craft to create tension**.

Lesson #1: Types of Tension

In this lesson, I discuss the three types of tension and give some pointers on how to create and use the first two types, intrigue tension and dramatic tension.

Lesson #2: Stretching Tension

When you get us to a point of conflict, do you summarize it and rush past it or linger on it and allow the reader to feel maximum tension? Using a passage from a novel called *The Power*, I offer a guide on how to stretch tension.

Lesson #3: Romantic Tension

Here, I discuss how romantic or sexual tension differs from the other types of tension, and I offer a quick demonstration of the key driver of romantic tension.

Lesson #4: Creating Suspense

There are six broad categories for creating suspense. Here, I discuss each of them and give examples.

TYPES OF TENSION

Tension is **the anxiety that results from a lack of resolution**. Humans have a thirst for order and balance. Any time order is disrupted or prevented from being restored, we feel a small anxiety.

In my conceptualization, there are three kinds of tension: intrigue tension, dramatic tension, and romantic tension.

Intrigue tension arises from mysteries, oddities, strangeness. When we're confronted with information that is incomplete or unusual, we want to know more about it. We find ourselves asking "Why?" "How?" and "What's this mean?"

Dramatic tension arises from conflict situations. It's the result of our watching a character face a problem, obstacle, or the unknown; we wonder what she'll do as a result of that confrontation. Dramatic tension spurs us to ask, "What will happen next?"

Romantic—or sexual—tension is a little different. This one is about our anticipating a union of some sort. We wonder whether and how two characters will come together in a romantic or sexual way.

Not all stories will contain romantic tension, but all should contain intrigue and dramatic tension. They're the basic source of reader engagement. Each small spark of tension spurs the reader on. In order to restore the imbalance created by the tension, we have to keep reading.

In this first section, I want to get you to understand intrigue and dramatic tension, see how they work in a piece of flash fiction, and then think about how you can use them best.



Dramatic



- Dramatic tension comes from conflicts
- The driving question for dramatic tension: What's going to happen next?
- The reader feels uncertainty about the outcome of the conflict

Intrigue



- Intrigue tension comes from expression
- The driving question for intrigue tension: What does this mean?
- The reader feels uncertainty about the meaning of the words

Look at the following story, "The Wig," by Brady Udall. And see if you can recognize where intrigue tension and dramatic tension arise within this piece. On the following page, I'll provide some annotations, but study it first without my annotations.

My eight-year-old son found a wig in the garbage dumpster this morning. I walked into the kitchen, highly irritated that I couldn't make a respectable knot in my green paisley tie, and there he was at the table, eating cereal and reading the funnies, the wig pulled tightly over his hair like a football helmet. The wig was a dirty bush of curly blonde hair, the kind you might see on a prostitute or someone who is trying to imitate Marilyn Monroe.

I asked him where he got the wig and he told me, his mouth full of cereal. When I advised him that we do not wear things we find in the garbage, he simply continued eating and reading as if he didn't hear me. I wanted him to take that wig off, but I couldn't ask him to do it. I forgot all about my tie and going to work. I looked out the window where a mist fell slowly on the street. I paced into the living room and back, trying hard not to look at my son. He ignored me. I could hear him munching cereal and rustling paper. There was a picture--or a memory, real or imagined, that I couldn't get out of my mind. Last spring, before the accident, my wife was sitting in the chair where now my son always sits. She was reading the paper, to see how the Blackhawks did the night before, and her sleep-mussed hair was only slightly longer and darker than the hair of my son's wig.

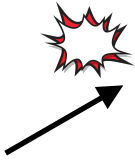
I wondered whether my son had a similar picture in his head or if he had a picture at all. I watched him and he finally looked up at me. But his face was blank. He went back to his reading. I walked around the table, picked him up and held him against my chest. I pressed my nose into that wig, and it smelled not like the clean shampoo scent I might have been hoping for, but like old lettuce. I suppose it didn't matter at that point. My son put his smooth arms around my neck and for maybe a few seconds, we were together again, the three of us.

INTRIGUE TENSION

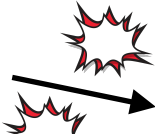
Hmm. Given that "The Wig" is the title of the story, I wonder what this is about.



Yuck. He's wearing the wig? Why?



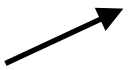
Why couldn't he ask?



Why did he forget about work?



Why did he pace? What's going on?



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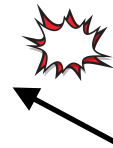
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DRAMATIC TENSION



How will the father respond to this?



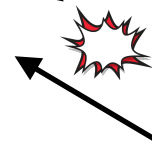
A clear conflict. Again, how will the father respond to this?



Aha. There's less mystery now. This is drama. The memory hurts. What's he going to do?



The son's face is blank. What's he going to do?



What's he going to do to the son and how will the son react?

SOME LESSONS

1. **Placement of tension.** You may notice that there's a bit more intrigue tension in the beginning and more dramatic tension in the middle and end. That's pretty typical. Intrigue tension invites us in; dramatic tension keeps us there. This is not to say that you can only have intrigue tension in the beginning of your story, but intrigue tension does tend to crowd around beginnings of scenes, chapters, and whole stories.
2. **Reader reaction.** Intrigue tension provokes curiosity but not concern. Dramatic tension provokes curiosity and concern. If you want to provoke an emotional reaction in your reader, you need dramatic tension. Intrigue tension is useful, but it produces an intellectual reaction, not an emotional one.
3. **Withheld information.** Note how much information Udall withholds from the reader in the first half of the story. It's not until that sentence that begins with "There was a picture—a memory," that we get any sense of the context. By withholding information, Udall creates intrigue tension.
4. **Narrative POV.** Udall writes close to his POV character. We have access to the father's interiority, and so we don't get explanations about the world that are for the reader benefit only. This way, withholding information doesn't feel manipulative; it feels appropriate to this protagonist's story.
5. **Action.** Dramatic tension is relevant to action. We wonder what's going to happen. We wonder what a character is going to do. Make sure things are happening in your story. Writers of literary, character-centered fiction sometimes get a bit bogged down in characters' feelings and thoughts while neglecting the external story. The internal and the external go hand in hand. You simply can't have dramatic tension without stuff happening.
6. **Frequency.** Lastly, I want to point out how full of tension this small story is. Udall is getting some small spark of tension at least twice a paragraph. Yes, a novel may be a bit more leisurely at times, but you should strive for multiple sparks of tension on every page.

For more on intrigue tension and dramatic tension, check out my [Story Momentum Mastery course](#).

APPLY TO YOUR WORK

Look at some of your own work and mark the intrigue tension and the dramatic tension in your pages.

Troubleshoot:

Too little Intrigue tension?

- I can withhold information until later
- I need to cut some of my initial exposition, leaving it unstated
- I can write closer to my POV character to heighten the intrigue

Too much intrigue tension?

- I'm confusing readers and need to temper the mystery by adding in some good old dramatic tension
- I have plenty of dramatic tension, too, so I need to introduce more question-answering exposition and not be quite so coy

Too little dramatic tension?

- I need to introduce more conflict
- I need to find ways to eke more tension out of the conflict I have

Too much dramatic tension?

- Email td@stormwritingschool.com and convince TD that's possible

STRETCHING TENSION

Stretching tension means lingering within the trouble more. Too often, I see writers get their characters right to the brink of trouble and then get them out of it immediately. Do you take us to a point of conflict and then, rather than allow us to see it play out and get all worried about the outcome, summarize it or just resolve it quickly?

Stretching tension means you lengthen the scene but also make it more gripping.

In my course on [Story Momentum](#), I differentiate stretching tension from bridging conflict, the other method of getting tension on the page. Bridging conflict is about adding more conflicts; stretching tension is about eking as much tension as possible out of **one objective, one conflict**. A man has to get through the airport and board a plane without getting flagged as suspicious. Federal agents escorting a person of interest have spotted a vehicle of armed assailants and have to neutralize them. A woman has gone to a funeral home to make arrangements for her mother's burial and is about to see her mother's dead body for the first time.

Within that one-objective, one-conflict situation, how can you create maximum tension? That's the concern for those wanting to stretch conflict. In the following pages, I offer an annotated passage and then a guide for stretching tension.

The following excerpt comes from Naomi Alderman’s novel *The Power*. The premise of the novel is that girls across the world suddenly discover they have the power to produce electric shocks, just like electric eels. They have a “skein” in their chests, which generates the electro-static energy. Teen girls were the first to exhibit the ability, but they can awaken it within older women, all of whom have a skein. Here, the POV character is Margot Cleary, the mayor of an unnamed city in the United States. Her daughter has recently awakened the power within Margot, who, in this scene, is being tested for the ability as the government tries to reign in the chaos that has erupted from this sudden weaponization of female bodies.

“Come on in, Mayor Cleary. Sit down.”

The room is small, and there is only one tiny window far up near the ceiling, letting in a thin strip of gray light. When the nurse visits for the annual flu shot, this is the room she uses, or if someone’s doing the staff review. There’s a table, and three chairs. Behind the table is a woman wearing a bright blue security tag pinned to her lapel. On top of the table is a piece of machinery: it looks like it might be a microscope or a blood-testing apparatus; there are two needles and a focusing window and lenses.

So far, we’re just getting a sense of the scenario here. (We have intrigue tension about this menacing machine, by the way).

The woman says, “We want you to know, Madam Mayor, that everyone in the building is being tested. You haven’t been singled out.”

“Even the men?” Margot raises an eyebrow.

“Well, no, not the men.”

Margot thinks about that.

“Okay. And it’s ... what exactly?”

The woman gives a faint smile: “Madam Mayor, you signed the papers. You know what this is.”

Our first indication of Margot’s emotional response.

She feels her throat constrict. She puts one hand on her hip. “No, actually, I want you to tell me what it is. For the record.”

The woman wearing the security tag says, “It’s state-wide mandatory testing for the presence of a skein, or the electrostatic power.” She starts to read from a card sitting next to the machine. “Please be advised that following a state-wide order from Governor Daniel Dandon, your continued eligibility for your government position is dependent on your agreement to be tested. A positive

test result need not necessarily have any bearing on your future employment. It is possible for a woman to test positive without knowing that she has the capacity to use the electrostatic power. Counseling is available if the results of this test are distressing to you, or to help you consider your options if your current position is no longer suitable.”

Margot’s worry is heightening here as she comes to realize the personal consequences for her.

“What does that mean,” says Margot, “no longer suitable? What does it mean?”

The woman purses her lips: “Certain positions involving contact with children and the public have been mandated as unsuitable by the governor’s office.”

It’s like Margot can see Daniel Dandon, the governor of this great state, standing behind the woman’s chair, laughing.

She has a personal vendetta with this guy, thus this test—and her impending failure—has stakes within that context.

“*Children and the public?* What does that leave me?”

The woman smiles. “If you haven’t experienced the power yet, it’s all going to be fine. Nothing to worry about, on with your day.”

“It’s not fine for everyone.”

But Margot has experienced it. So now the threat is heightened.

The woman flicks a switch on the machine. It starts up a gentle hum.

“I’m ready to begin, Madam Mayor.”

“What happens if I say no?”

She size. “If you say no, I’ll have to record it, and the governor will inform someone in the State Department.”

Effectively, this means there’s no way out.

Margot sits down. She thinks, They won’t be able to tell I’ve used it. No one knows. I haven’t been lying. She thinks, Shit. She swallows.

Which is to say, she’s worried. Failure seems imminent.

“Fine,” she says, “I’d like it recorded that I’m making a formal protest about being forced to undergo invasive testing.”

“Okay,” says the woman. “I’ll get that written down.”

And behind her faint smirk, Margot can see Daniel’s face again, laughing. She puts her arm out for the electrodes, thinking that, at least, at least after this is done, even after she’s out of a job and

there go her political ambitions, at least then she won't have to look at his stupid face any more.

More of the personal vendetta stakes here.

They apply the sticky electrode pads to her wrists, her shoulders, her collar bone. They're looking for electrical activity, the technician explains in a low, droning voice. "You should be perfectly comfortable, ma'am. At worst, you'll experience a slight stinging sensation."

At worst, I'll experience the end of my career, Margot thinks, but says nothing.

The main stakes for her, though, is this pending loss of job and purpose.

It's all very simple. They're going to trigger her autonomic nervous system with a series of low-level electrical impulses. It works on the girl babies in routine tests now being run in hospitals, even though the answer is always the same, because all the girl babies have it now, every single one. Give them an almost imperceptible shock across the skein; the skein will respond automatically with a jolt. Margot can feel her skein is ready, anyway—it's the nerves, the adrenaline.

Now, it's a matter of teasing us with the failure. It might happen here.

Remember to look surprised, she says to herself, remember to look afraid and ashamed and taken aback by this brand-new thing.

The machine makes a low, buzzing hum as it starts. Margot is familiar with the schematics. It will begin by giving an entirely imperceptible shock, too low for the senses to register. The skeins of those little baby girls almost always respond at this level, or the next one. The machine has ten settings. The electrical stimulus will increase, level by level. At a certain point, Margot's own aged and unpracticed skein will respond, like calling to like. And then they will know. She breathes in, she breathes out. She waits.

Make the failure seem imminent.

At the start she cannot feel it at all. There is simply the sensation of pressure building. Across her chest, down her spine. She does not feel the first level, or the second level, or the third, as the machine clicks smoothly through its cycle. The dial moves on. Margot feels that it would be pleasant, now, to discharge herself. It is like the feeling, on waking, that one might like to open one's eyes. She resists. It is not difficult.



Alternating worry with success. I'm marking the worry with the electrical bolt and the success with the sun.

She breathes in, she breathes out. The woman operating the machines smiles, makes a note on her Xeroxed sheet of boxes. A fourth o in the fourth box. Nearly half way there. Of course, at some point, it will become impossible, Margot has read it in the literature. She makes a rueful little smile at the technician.



“Are you comfortable?” the woman says.

“I’d be more comfortable with a glass of scotch,” Margot says

The dial clicks forward. Now it is becoming more difficult. She feels the pricking at the right side of her collarbone and in the palm of her hand. Come on, it says, come on. It is like a pressure holding her arm down now. Uncomfortable. She could so easily throw this heavy, pressing weight off and be free of it. She cannot be seen to sweat, cannot show a struggle.

Margot thinks of what she did when Bobby told her he’d been having an affair. She remembers how her body went hot and cold, how she felt her throat close up. She remembers how he said, “Aren’t you going to say anything? Don’t you have anything to say about that?” Her mother would scream at her father for leaving the door unlatched when he walked out in the morning, or forgetting his slippers in the middle of the living room rug. She’s never been one of those women, never wanted to be. She used to walk in the cool of the yew trees when she was a child, placing each foot so carefully, pretending that if she took one wrong step the roots would curl up through the earth and grab her. She has always known exactly how to be silent.

This bit of back story helps explain why she’s able to resist the urge to discharge, so it’s leading to success, but it’s rooted in past pain.

The dial clicks on. There is a neat row of eight zeros on the woman’s Xeroxed sheet. Margot had been afraid she would not know what a zero felt like, that the business would be over before it began and she would have no choice. She breathes in and breathes out. It is hard now, very hard, but the difficulty is familiar. Her body wants something, and she is denying it. The itch of it, the pressure of it, is across the front of her torso, down through the muscles of her stomach, into her pelvis, around her buttocks. It is like simply not passing water when your bladder asks you to. It is like holding your breath for a few seconds longer than is entirely comfortable. It’s no wonder that the baby girls can’t do it. It’s a wonder they’ve found any adult woman at all with this thing. Margot feels herself want to discharge, and doesn’t. Just doesn’t.

The machine clicks on to its tenth setting. It is not impossible, not even nearly. She waits. The humming cuts off. The fans whirr and then are silent. The pen lifts from the graph paper. Ten zeros.

Margot tries to look disappointed. “No dice, huh?”

The technician shrugs.

Margo tucks one foot behind the other ankle as the technician removes the electrodes. "I never thought I had it." She makes her voice crack just a little at the end of the sentence.

Daniel will look at this report. He'll be the one to sign off on it. Cleared, it will say, for government work.

She twitches her shoulders and let out a little barking laugh. ←

Very clever here on Alderman's part: the resolution to this conflict promises future conflict.

HOW TO STRETCH TENSION

1. **Establish the conflict.** You want to make it clear early in the scene that there's threat or obstacle. We get introduced to the machine right away in the above excerpt.
2. **Have the character worry.** Get the character worrying about failure pretty early on. That worry introduces us to the heart of stretching tension: that failure and success have equal chance of happening. In fact, if you want to, you can give the impression that failure is more likely than success. You just can't have success be more likely than failure.

In Alderman's *The Power*, Margot anticipates that the test will reveal that she does indeed have the power, and that she'll lose her job as a result.

3. **(Optionally) Identify the stakes.** In some cases, the stakes are self-evident or you may want to keep them a mystery. But when a POV character is conscious of the stakes, the worry is magnified. More importantly, when the reader is conscious of stakes, the worry is magnified. Is there anything you can do to reveal less obvious stakes? Are there emotional stakes for your character? We may know what the stakes (failure to achieve the goal) are, but do we know that they mean to the character?

In *The Power*, Margot will not only lose her job as mayor, she'll be facing the end of her entire political career, and she'll lose face among her peers and, most importantly, with her nemesis, the governor.

4. **Cut off easy exits.** Let us know there's no way out, that the character has to face this conflict. In *The Power*, Margot cannot refuse the test without suffering some political consequences.
5. **Create incremental successes and failures.** Remember: you're not creating new conflicts. The goal and threat remain the same. But alternate optimism and pessimism. Give us a little hope and then give us a bleak outlook. This is the heart of stretching tension. Tease success; tease failure. (See the electrical bolts and suns.)
6. **(Optionally) Include a digression to the past.** Not necessary in all circumstances, but incorporating the past can often inform the success or failure of the present scene. In *The Power*, Margot's small flashback to her husband revealing his affair has parallels to the current scene, as it's all about whether she can withstand shock (literal and figurative) and whether she can restrain herself.

STRETCHING TENSION PLANNER

Identify a scene of yours that you would like to stretch.

What is the conflict or obstacle? (And are you establishing it right away?)	
What does failure look like and why is the character worried about it?	
List the various stakes for the POV character. That is, what does failure mean for the character?	
What is it that cuts off the exits?	
List some incremental successes that can occur within the scene.	
Is there some past event that has bearing on the current situation? Describe.	

CREATING SUSPENSE

Suspense comes down to a simple concept: present the character with the unknown. Suspense occurs under conditions in which the reader knows as much as the character. Not more (that's dramatic irony), not less (that's mystery). We readers are equally in the dark as the perspective character, and the suspense arises from not knowing how the scene will play out.

The unknown comes in many forms, however.

A while ago, I came across an article in *Frontiers of Psychology* called "Toward a general psychological model of tension and suspense," and its authors Moritz Lehne and Stefan Koelsch make a useful distinction between six components underlying tension and suspense.

In my course [The Tension Lab](#), I examine suspense in detail, ultimately outlining 34 ways to create suspense. But those 34 ways are rooted in Lehne and Koelsch's six psychological components.

So without further ado, here they are:

1. Conflict, Dissonance, Instability

These three terms all refer to the same idea. As Lehne and Koelsch explain, "conflict, dissonance, or instability creates a yearning for more stable, or consonant states, and this creates suspense that persists until the conflict is resolved and replaced by a more stable state."

This is the bread and butter of suspense, and it looks something like this:

Nora cracked an eye at the first snarl, interrupting her drowsy suck on the bottle, but she settled back, and I listened to the dogs fight as she drifted off. It was the heart of summer, the door wide open, the air a second before abuzz with nothing more than the evening hum of crickets, the last hooting of the mourning doves.

(This is the very start of the story, so there's nothing you need to know in advance.)

To tell the truth, I'd been dozing off along with Nora. Despite everything we'd said, all we'd tried, Fran and I'd wound up with a daddy's boy and a mommy's girl. But that evening, Benjamin himself insisted on the role reversal; me putting Nora down; Fran pitching the tennis ball while he took his cuts with his little wooden bat, a souvenir of the local minor leaguers. Outside, I couldn't help but wonder how Fran was explaining the action, if it was frightening him. If he needed his dad.

But my eyes closed too, which made it easier for me to see the neighbor's Dalmatian streaking toward me when I'd been a kid. One nip in the back of the leg, a bad bruise, no skin breaking, but, decades later, I'm still uncomfortable around dogs, their quick, playful lunges, their long, sharp teeth.

Then, all of this I'm sure in the first second, Fran's shriek reached above the snarls and squeals, which, as I bolted upright, no longer sounded like the yelping of any injured dog.

I'm ashamed I can't tell you what happened to Nora, how I came to put her down, how I blew through the screen door, how I first saw Fran swatting Benjamin's tiny plastic mitt against a big brown dog of no specific breed. Benjamin himself struggled back from the dog's mouth, his face hidden in its jaws.

(from "Attack" by Pete Fromm)

How is he going to deal with the fact that a dog is attacking his son? Suspense from conflict here.

2. Uncertainty

Lehne and Koelsch identify uncertainty as the key component underlying situations "in which anticipated future events are uncertain but potentially highly significant (e.g., a medical diagnosis, an important job interview, a rendezvous, etc.)."

This is different from conflict. Here we need only the threat of conflict, not necessarily conflict itself. In fact, it could even be the promise of a resolution. We just want to get the reader feeling the fear or hope that accompanies an uncertain future.

The following passage from Jeff VenderMeer's novel *Annihilation* demonstrates:

"I'll go first and see what's down there," the surveyor said, finally, and we were happy to defer to her.

The initial stairwell curved steeply downward and the steps were narrow, so the surveyor would have to back her way into the tower. We used sticks to clear the spiderwebs as she lowered herself into position on the

Premise here: a team of four women has traveled into "Area X" to research what's going on. They come upon this hole in the ground.

stairwell. She teetered there, weapon slung across her back, looking up at us. She had tied her hair back and it made the lines of her face seem tight and drawn. Was this the moment when we were supposed to stop her? To come up with some other plan? If so, none of us had the nerve.

With a strange smirk, almost as if judging us, the surveyor descended until we could only see her face framed in the gloom below, and then not even that. She left an empty space that was shocking to me, as if the reverse had actually happened: as if a face had suddenly floated into view out of the darkness. I gasped, which drew a stare from the psychologist. The anthropologist was too busy staring down into the stairwell to notice any of it.

“Is everything okay?” the psychologist called out to the surveyor. Everything had been fine just a second before. Why would anything be different now?

The surveyor made a sharp grunt in answer, as if agreeing with me. For a few moments more, we could still hear the surveyor struggling on those short steps. Then came silence, and then another movement, at a different rhythm, which for a terrifying moment seemed like it might come from a second source.

But then the surveyor called up to us. “Clear to this level.”

The author’s small touches here (the sudden face, the rhetorical question about why it wouldn’t be okay, and the possible second source of sound) create major uncertainty.

3. Expectation, Prediction, Anticipation

Again three words for the same concept. Here’s the Lehne and Koelsch explanation of this one: “As events unfold in time (e.g., in real life, fictional worlds, or music), they are constantly evaluated against a background of predictions that is continuously updated during the temporal evolution of events. Anticipated events can then generate experiences of tension or suspense.”

That’s the most jargony explanation thus far. In plainer English: as we read a story, we make predictions about what will happen next; there’s suspense in waiting to see whether our predictions will come true.

This form of suspense rarely ever comes isolated, distinct from other forms. But it’s that moment in the story when you’re almost reading ahead to figure out how something resolves because you just can’t wait. And this can occur with negative happenings—conflicts, threats—as well as positive ones—romantic encounters, solutions. In the exemplar passage above for conflict, we may have a prediction, but I’d say the question of what will happen overshadows my prediction. In the exemplar for uncertainty, there’s a possible conflict, not a definite one. And I have no idea what’s going to happen next. In the following exemplar for anticipation, I have

some idea of what will happen next. This one is the opening of Carmen Maria Machado's story "The Husband Stitch."

In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn't how things are done, but this is how I am going to do them. I am at a neighbor's party with my parents, and I am seventeen. Though my father didn't notice, I drank half a glass of white wine in the kitchen a few minutes ago, with the neighbor's teenage daughter. Everything is soft, like a fresh oil painting.

The boy is not facing me. I see the muscles of his neck and upper back, how he fairly strains out of his button-down shirts. I run slick. It isn't that I don't have choices. I am beautiful. I have a pretty mouth. I have a breast that heaves out of my dresses in a way that seems innocent and perverse all at the same time. I am a good girl, from a good family. But he is a little craggy, in that way that men sometimes are, and I want.

I once heard a story about a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled her off to a sanitarium. I don't know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly that they take you away from the known world for wanting it?

This little back flash lends some menace to the prediction, so there is some uncertainty, too.

The boy notices me. He seems sweet, flustered. He says, hello. He asks my name.

I have always wanted to choose my moment, and this is the moment I choose.

Right in the end, here, do you feel the suspense-via-prediction?

4. Emotional Significance of Anticipated Events

Lehne and Koelsch note that "anticipated events need to be relevant to the concerns of the individual, i.e., they have to have some emotional significance, in order to generate tension or suspense."

And so as a writer, when you give us a better, fuller understanding of the emotional significance of the goal or of failing to achieve it, we'll feel more suspense.

How do you do this? By establishing context and having the scene bear the weight of that context. Bring in character interiority and/or the past to provide that context. Or do what Cormac McCarthy does in this amazing scene in *The Road* with *situation*.

On the outskirts of the city they came to a supermarket. A few old cars in the trashstrewn parking lot. They left the cart in the lot and walked the littered aisles. In the produce section in the bottom of the bins they found a few ancient runner beans and what looked to have once been apricots,

long dried to wrinkled effigies of themselves. The boy followed behind. They pushed out through the rear door. In the alleyway behind the store a few shopping carts, all badly rusted. They went back through the store again looking for another cart but there were none. By the door were two soft drink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and open with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca-Cola.

What is it, Papa?

It's a treat. For you.

What is it?

Here. Sit down.

He slipped the boy's knapsack straps loose and set the pack on the floor behind him and he put his thumbnail under the aluminum clip on the top of the can and opened it. He leaned his nose to the slight fizz coming from the can and then handed it to the boy. Go ahead, he said.

The boy took the can. It's bubbly, he said.

Go ahead.

He looked at his father and then tilted the can and drank. He sat there thinking about it. It's really good, he said.

Yes. It is.

You have some, Papa.

I want you to drink it.

You have some.

He took the can and sipped it and handed it back. You drink it, he said. Let's just sit here.

It's because I won't ever get to drink another one, isn't it?

Ever's a long time.

Okay, the boy said.

← Bam! There is it right there. Feel it? Emotional significance!

5. Lack of Control

If a story is all about watching a character take action to pursue a goal and face obstacles in doing so, then anything that makes us doubt the character can achieve the goal is going to create a feeling of suspense. As Lehne and Koelsch say, "a feeling of helplessness can add to the experience of tension." So that's what lack of control does for us.

This component, like the next one, is often an intensifier for other types of suspense, something that layers on top. You'll see this most often in an all-is-lost moment, or an apparent defeat. Like this one from Chloe Benjamin's novel *The Immortalists*, in which Simon has contracted AIDS (in 1982):

There are twelve beds in Simon's ward at San Francisco General. There is a laminated sign on the swinging door that leads inside—MASK GOWN GLOVES PUNCTURE PROOF NEEDLE BOX IN ROOM NO PREGNANT WOMEN—and a smaller sign that reads *No Flowers*.

Klara and Robert stay overnight in Simon's room, sleeping in chairs. His bed is separated from another by a thin white curtain. Simon doesn't like to look at his roommate, a former chef whose bones now protrude; he can't keep anything down. Within days, the bed is empty again, the partition drifting in the breeze.

Robert says, "You have to tell your family."

Simon shakes his head. "They can't know I went like this."

"But you haven't gone," says Klara. Her lap is covered with pamphlets—*When a Friend Has Cancer; Affection, Not Rejection*—and her eyes are slick. "You're right here, with us."

"Yeah." Simon's throat feels tight: the glands in his neck are swollen.

It's not a spoiler to say that we've been anticipating Simon's death for most of the story. The suspense is about when and how it will happen and what effect that lack of control will have on those around him.

6. Temporal Aspects

Lehne and Koelsch define this mostly as a matter of delaying the resolution—or, in their more obscure psychologists' phrasing: "temporal distance between the initiating event creating the tension and the moment in which tension resolves influences the tension experience." I like to add time limits and temporal urgency to this category, since, you know, it makes sense. But the main form this will take is delaying resolution. So this one is pretty simple.

Now, delaying resolution is an intensifier of the other forms of suspense listed above. But the deadline is somewhat unique. The following passage comes from *The Hunger Games*. Katniss has a limited time to scope out the encampment (the

cornucopia) being guarded by the elite tributes. It's full of survival supplies, but it's also booby-trapped, as she realizes here:

"It's mined," I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, Foxface's reaction, the involvement of the boy from District 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. But where did he get them? In the supplies?

That's not the sort of weapon the Gamemakers usually provide, given that they like to see the tributes draw blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted the tributes into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down. The land mines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, but the boy from District 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the Games do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Gamemakers.

Well, hurray for the boy from District 3 for putting one over on them, but what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from District 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies but ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot. I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Rue's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

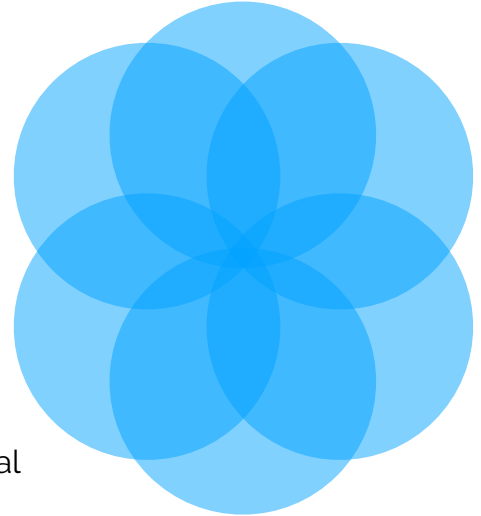
As you can see, this excerpt is pretty interior, but the suspense is coming from this dilemma she faces: she has a difficult challenge and only limited time to complete it.

The Big Picture

There's a lot more to explore here. As I mentioned, in my [Tension Lab](#) course, I break each of these categories down and give you 34 subdivisions of suspense. But these six types of suspense are the basis.

It's also worth noting that these types do overlap a bit. In fact, they should. You'll get deeper shades of suspense when you pile one kind on another.

Your particular story may rely more heavily on one or two dominant types. Mystery and horror, for instance, tend toward uncertainty and anticipation. Romance encourages a lot of anticipation and delaying resolution (temporal aspects). *Game of Thrones* likes to surprise its audience, thereby encouraging a lot of anticipating/predicting, so I'd say its dominant modes are anticipation and conflict. The Harry Potter series uses a lot of emotional significance. *Hunger Games* uses a lot of time deadlines (temporal aspects) and conflict. Ever seen *127 Hours*? Lots of lack of control suspense there. And a health-related memoir would also have lack of control and emotional significance as dominant modes of suspense.



What are the dominant modes in your most recent work-in-progress?

SUSPENSE PLANNER

For any given scene of yours, think through the basic foundation for suspense and what methods you might employ for getting more suspense.

What's the scene objective?	
What stands in the way of that objective?	
Are you getting us to wonder how the character will handle a conflict? How?	
How are you creating uncertainty?	
Are you spurring the reader to make predictions? How?	

<p>What is the emotional significance of the objective?</p> <p>What is the emotional significance of the trouble?</p> <p>What is the emotional significance of the various possible outcomes?</p>	
<p>Will this be a scene that includes an apparent defeat or otherwise show a lack of control? Explain.</p>	
<p>Will you include time constraints? Describe.</p>	
<p>What can you do to stretch tension?</p>	

CREATING SEXUAL TENSION

Sexual tension is a distinct kind of tension

Dramatic tension arises from conflict. We wonder how characters will deal with a problem or obstacle. Sexual tension arises from our anticipation of two characters' romantic desire for one another being "consummated." And by "consummation," I mean anything from a kiss to marriage to intercourse or anything in between really.

In fact, it may be best to label this romantic tension since it applies as much to erotica as it does to YA and Christian Romance. Readers are hoping for a union—be it physical or emotional or spiritual.

Thus, the outcome of romantic tension is not escape from harm; rather, it's about people coming together.

Romantic tension ≠ sexual arousal or dramatic tension

Consider a slasher film featuring a scantily-clad college coed being chased by an axe murderer. The tension comes from the anxiety about whether she will achieve her goal of escaping from the conflict before her. If there is any sexual arousal in such a scene, it is completely beside the point and gratuitous. If this scene featured an unattractive, asexual, gender-neutral potential victim being chased by an asexual assailant, it would still have all the same tension. That's dramatic tension, not sexual tension.

How does one create romantic tension?

There are two main guidelines. The first is to prolong and delay. Think stretching tension but over the course of 60 pages or even your entire novel if your main plot line is a romantic one.

It's human nature for our courtships to be relatively long and to extend beyond mere sexual contact. I mean, sure, we're also the species who came up with Tinder, but we tend to imbue such purely physical unions with a lot less meaning and value and emotional investment.

And again, the quick hookup might be arousing for some, but it's not going to have emotional power or tension.

So in order to prolong and delay, you'll want to

- A) Have a little ambivalence in the courtship/attraction
- B) Avoid having characters state feelings clearly and unequivocally
- C) Impede the relationship in various ways
- D) Avoid bringing them together in their final, satisfying union too quickly

The second big guideline is to have push and pull—factors pushing the characters apart; factors bringing them together. Think of it as the **“want to but can't” rule**. In my short course on Creating Romantic Tension, I outline specific kinds of pushes and pulls, but you'll have to take that course to get that list.

On the next page is a brief scene from the Jhumpa Lahiri story “Sexy,” which illustrates several of the above principles..

That day, stopping to smell one of the more pleasing [perfume] cards, Miranda noticed a man standing at one of the counters. He held a slip of paper covered in a precise, feminine hand. A saleswoman took one look at the paper and began to open drawers. She produced an oblong cake of soap in a black case, a hydrating mask, a vial of cell renewal drops, and two tubes of face cream. The man was tanned, with black hair that was visible on his knuckles. He wore a flamingo pink shirt, a navy blue suit, a camel overcoat with gleaming leather buttons. In order to pay he had taken off pigskin gloves. Crisp bills emerged from a burgundy wallet. He didn't wear a wedding ring.

← This is a very subtle push—the note written in a feminine hand.

← The narrator zeroes in on his appearance and takes note of his lack of wedding ring. All pull here.

“What can I get you, honey?” the saleswoman asked Miranda. She looked over the tops of her tortoiseshell glasses, assessing Miranda's complexion.

But note, too, that the attraction is not stated outright.

Miranda didn't know what she wanted. All she knew was that she didn't want the man to walk away. He seemed to be lingering, waiting, along with the saleswoman, for her to say something. She stared at some bottles, some short, others tall, arranged on an oval tray, like a family posing for a photograph.

← Pull: she's attracted to him.

“A cream,” Miranda said eventually.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

The saleswoman nodded, opening a frosted bottle. “This may seem a bit heavier than what you're used to, but I'd start now. All your wrinkles are going to form by twenty-five. After that they just started showing.”

While the saleswoman dabbed the cream on Miranda's face, the man stood and watched. While Miranda was told the proper way to apply it, in swift upward strokes beginning at the base of her throat, he spun the lipstick carousel. He pressed a pump that dispensed cellulite gel and massaged it into the back of his ungloved hand. He opened a jar, leaned over, and drew so close that a drop of cream flecked his nose.

← Pull: he lingers. Is he sticking around for her?

Miranda smiled, but her mouth was obscured by a large brush that the saleswoman was sweeping over her face. “This is blusher Number Two,” the woman said. “Gives you some color.”



Pull: her smiling at his behavior.

Miranda nodded, glancing at her reflection in one of the angled mirrors that lined the counter. She had silver eyes and skin as pale as paper, and if the contrast with her hair, as dark and glossy as an espresso bean, caused people to describe her as striking, if not pretty. She had a narrow, egg-shaped head that rose to a prominent point. Her features, too, were narrow, with nostrils so slim that they appeared to have been pinched with a clothespin. Now her face glowed, rosy at the cheeks, smoky below the brow bone. Her lips glistened.

The man was glancing in a mirror, too, quickly wiping the cream from his nose. Miranda wondered where he was from. She thought he might be Spanish, or Lebanese. When he opened another jar, and said, to no one in particular, “This one smells like pineapple,” she detected only the hint of an accent.

“Anything else for you today?” the saleswoman asked, accepting Miranda’s credit card.

“No thanks.”

The woman wrapped the cream in several layers of red tissue. “You’ll be very happy with this product.” Miranda’s hand was unsteady as she signed the receipt. The man hadn’t budged.



Pull: he’s still there.

“I threw in a sample of our new eye gel,” the saleswoman added, handing Miranda a small shopping bag. She looked at Miranda’s credit card before sliding it across the counter. “Bye-bye, Miranda.”

Miranda began walking. At first she sped up. Then, noticing the doors that lead to Downtown Crossing, she slowed down.



Push: she leaves quickly. Is she avoiding him?

“Part of your name is Indian,” the man said, pacing his steps with hers.

She stopped, as did he, at a circular table piled with sweaters, flanked with pine cones and velvet bows. “Miranda?”

“Mira. I have an aunt named Mira.”

His name was Dev. He worked in an investment bank back that way, he said, tilting his head in the direction of South Station. He

was the first man with a mustache, Miranda decided, she found handsome.

← Pull: clear attraction.

They walked together toward Park Street station, past the kiosks that sold cheap belts and handbags. A fierce January wind spoiled the part in her hair. As she fished for a token in her coat pocket, her eyes fell to his shopping bag. “And those are for her?”

“Who?”

“Your Aunt Mira.”

“They’re for my wife.” He uttered the words slowly, holding Miranda’s gaze. “She’s going to India for a few weeks.” He rolled his eyes. “She’s addicted to this stuff.”

← Push: he’s married. (But his wife will be gone. Is that a pull for Miranda?)

By the end of this scene, we have:

- Pushes and pulls
- A little ambivalence in the attraction
- Nobody has stated feelings outright
- Not yet together

ROMANTIC TENSION

For your scene or story, list the various pushes and pulls between the potential couple.

The Pulls

The Pushes

TAKE THE TENSION FURTHER

The resources above are just a start. Want to get better at creating tension in your stories? Check out the courses on offer at [stormwritingschool.com](https://www.stormwritingschool.com).

Story Momentum Mastery

This course is like a writing retreat. In fact, it's an adaptation of a popular course I taught at a week-long writing retreat in Madison, Wisconsin. In this one, you'll learn the key elements of story and how to ramp up each of those elements for maximum reader engagement.

At the end of this course, you'll come away much more prepared to create scene-by-scene momentum.

The numbers: six units, 45 lectures, 25 handouts, 5 assignments. I highly recommend the intensive track, which has you submitting homework to me for feedback.

<https://www.stormwritingschool.com/p/story-momentum>

The Tension Lab

In addition to fleshing out the suspense methods from six to 34 (!), this course examines two other means of engaging readers: mystery and dramatic irony. Loads of examples, tons of practical advice, and some of the clearest articulation you'll find of revolutionary craft.

<https://www.stormwritingschool.com/p/the-tension-lab>

Creating Romantic/Sexual Tension

This short course explores the pushes and pulls in more detail, giving you a longer, more robust scene as an exemplar and specifying the varieties of pushes and pulls you can use to create romantic tension in your stories. You'll come away with very clear and actionable techniques for upping your game.

<https://www.stormwritingschool.com/p/create-sexual-romantic-tension-in-your-stories>

ABOUT TD STORM



I've taught writing and literature since 1999, both at the high school and post-secondary levels. I currently teach at the University of Wisconsin and through my own writing school, Storm Writing School, which offers online resources and courses.

I write short stories and essays, with recent work at Literary Hub and Copper Nickel. I've been a finalist in several short story contests, and I won the Reynolds Price Short Fiction Award.

As past students of mine have confirmed, I'm a teacher through and through. Teaching is a passion of mine and it's my primary vocation. I don't come to it as an afterthought.

My editing is almost always tinged with a bit of instruction; just as I'm always looking for ways to improve my own writing, I'm always trying to help my students write the best story they can write. I believe in the power of story and I have the utmost faith in your attempts to create a powerful story. Your story deserves to be told as well as possible.

For more, read [my mission statement](#) for Storm Writing School and check out [my editing services](#).

"Having spent the last 7 years of my life inside college writing courses and continued studies programs, I can confidently say Tim Storm is one of the most memorable and informative teachers I have come across. He teaches the art of storytelling from a unique perspective that is intuitive and engaging. If you ever have the chance to take a class taught by Tim Storm, take it."

—Ben Reese, currently enrolled in the Iowa Writer's Workshop

"I am always amazed that Tim can take gut-level issues and raise them to literate, reproducible consciousness. Tim always takes the time to listen, learn someone's voice and their intentions, and help them say what they want to say in the most effective way. He respects the writer's voice and goals so no one ever sees his footprint in the work. It's evident that he truly loves to help people make their work better."

—Teria Robens, author of *What the Mirror Sees*, winner the 2015-2016 African American Arts Alliance of Chicago's Black Excellence Award for Outstanding Achievement in Literature-Fiction