What Is Suspense in Creative Writing?

In literature, suspense is an uneasy feeling that a reader gets when they don’t know what is going to happen next. A writer creates suspense through a controlled release of information to readers that raises key questions and makes readers eager, but terrified, to find out what happens. Sometimes, a writer builds suspense through dramatic irony—giving readers more information than the main character has. Writing suspense can also mean withholding information from the reader so they know as much as, or less than, the protagonist.

How Does Suspense Work?

In a broad sense, there are two types of suspense:

* **Telling the reader what’s happening.** You generate interest by allowing the reader to know more than the hero. This is called “[dramatic irony](https://masterclass.com/articles/writing-101-what-is-dramatic-irony-literary-device-definition-examples-and-tips-for-employing-dramatic-irony-in-writing" \t "_blank).” For example, your hero is waiting for his spouse to arrive, but she was murdered in a previous chapter. The reader is now filled with dread and expectation for what they know is coming: the hero’s shock at the news of his wife’s death.
* **Withholding information**. Generally speaking, thriller novels let the reader know more than the hero. But there is an alternate method—only letting the reader know the same or less as the hero. Interest comes from needing more information, and the reader is engaged by the hero’s quest because it slowly reveals explanations for things, such as why a hero’s wife was murdered. Curiosity drives the reader through the novel. So, remember to keep things vague when you need to.

Don’t forget that while most thriller and suspense stories function this way, on a page-by-page basis you may be using both types of suspense in any story.

How Does Suspense Affect the Reader?

It’s helpful to think of suspense in terms of the intended effect on your reader.

**Suspense creates a puzzle for your reader to solve.** In [Dan Brown’s](https://www.masterclass.com/classes/dan-brown-teaches-writing-thrillers) *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), for example, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu must solve a cryptex in order to find out why someone may have killed Sophie’s grandfather and is trying to kill them. Time pressure and physical danger play a role as well, but the reader’s prime focus is understanding the riddle.

**Suspense sets a mood**. And mood is an effective tool. Alfred Hitchcock was a master of creating a mood of foreboding in his films. Stephen King often raises the threat that something terrible might happen to his characters. He does this through internal monologue and crucible-like situations. *Read The Stand* (1978) for a classic example of these techniques.

**Time pressure fills the reader with urgency.** One way to do this is through deadlines. Deadlines are effective when they provide a threat to something the protagonist cares about.

**Physical danger grips your reader**. Fear is a basic emotion that thriller writers love to elicit. It is best conveyed through concise sensory detail. Capture exactly what it’s like for your hero, and your audience will experience the fear more intensely. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) does this superbly. Writing about any kind of nightmarish character can create an intense apprehension in your reader as well.

**Creating expectations can trigger dread in your reader**. Perhaps your hero is watching something intently or is afraid of a horrible event. Showing this through internal monologue will give your reader a front row seat to the anxiety.

**Abrupt surprises in the story will give the reader a shock and serve a number of goals.** Sudden reversals or disasters create instability, and there’s nothing worse than discovering that a main character you thought was good is actually the bad guy. George R.R. Martin does this best in *Game of Thrones* (1996).

**Most of all, you want your reader to wonder what will happen next**. You can generate curiosity about almost anything. In his book, \*The Fear Index \*(2012), Robert Harris creates page-turning suspense about a man who does almost nothing but sit at a computer.

What Is the Difference Between Suspense and Surprise?

There’s a subtle but big difference between suspense and surprise. With suspense, you’re playing with your readers’ expectations of time. They know information is coming, they just don’t know when. Surprise is where you tell your reader something and the reader had no idea it was coming. Both can be fun and effective.

How Do Cliffhangers Affect Suspense?

[Cliffhangers](https://www.masterclass.com/classes/rl-stine-teaches-writing-for-young-audiences/chapters/outlining-surprise-endings-and-cliffhangers/preview) became a modern phenomenon with the serialization of Charles Dickens’s stories, and they’ve continued to be popular right up to the present day. A cliffhanger takes advantage of the Zeigarnik Effect. This psychological theory states that people can recall a task better if it is interrupted. It seems that humans naturally desire closure, and to deprive them of it triggers their interest. No matter if it’s on television or in books, one pattern remains: after a cliffhanger, most writers don’t continue the action they’ve just interrupted. Instead, having won their audience’s attention, they switch into a more thoughtful discourse or a slow-moving [exposition](https://masterclass.com/articles/what-is-exposition-film). Sometimes they move to another storyline entirely, busily working to build more promises.

It’s important to remember that although you’ve nabbed the reader’s interest, you still have to fulfill your promises to them or not only will they lose interest, they’ll lose faith in you as well.

Although you can create a cliffhanger at the end of any chapter throughout your novel, it’s harder to pull off at the end of a book.

## These notes have been adapted from:

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**Ten Ways to Create Suspense**

**Create a promise in every chapter.** Almost anything can be a question to the reader— What’s hidden in the box? How will this character get out of the crashing plane? Who planted the bomb beneath the bus? Any question you’ve raised contains a promise that you’ll answer it.

**Create a hidden identity**. One of Dan Brown’s favorite tools for creating suspense is creating a character with a hidden identity—a puppet-master or mastermind who controls things from behind the scenes, but whose identity is unknown.

**Create a puzzle.** Sometimes a quest revolves around solving a riddle and following a series of clues that build up from the first chapter right up through to the story’s climax. This could be a trail of symbolic information that your characters need in order to figure out escape routes, for example, or a straightforward solving of a murder mystery.

**Open a chapter or section with a question.** Or an interesting fact.

**Use flashbacks** to open new sources of suspense.

**Finish a chapter with a**[cliffhanger ending](https://masterclass.com/articles/how-to-write-a-cliffhanger-14-tips-for-writing-page-turning-cliffhangers-with-dan-brown-and-rl-stine" \t "_blank)**.** Leave the protagonist in a precarious position with no escape routes and end your chapter there.

**Give characters complicated histories.** Withhold information to keep the reader guessing about the dark secrets in someone’s past (and how it may affect that character’s behavior today).

**Use internal monologue to heighten tension.** Anything your protagonist worries about will worry the reader. Their thoughts and feelings can create apprehension and set a mood of anticipation.

**Introduce**[**parallel**](https://masterclass.com/articles/writing-101-what-is-parallelism)**plot lines.** When you’ve got subplots for villains and secondary characters, you create more places for suspense and raise questions in the reader’s mind about how the various stories might be related.

**Compress a story’s timeline.** This ensures the characters are under more pressure. If your story takes place over the course of two weeks, try making it happen in one. Compressing time may feel like an artificial imposition, but the effect on your characters can be immense, and the resulting tension can often jump-start a struggling story.

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## A Quick Exercise to Write a Suspenseful Scene or Short Story

Choose a mundane (dull or unexciting) moment from any of the writing you’ve done so far or from a real-life event. For example, pick a scene where your characters are walking or eating or having a quiet discussion. If you don’t have a scene like this yet, select a topic from the list below.

* A spider crawling up his web
* A child coming out of school
* Two people sitting in a car at a stop light
* A teenager lying in bed at night
* A group of men going into a stadium
* A woman eating alone in a restaurant

On a page in your notebook, write a paragraph (no more than a page) turning your mundane scene into a suspenseful moment. You only have one paragraph and one page, so if there’s something your reader needs to know in order for things to make sense, find clever ways to blend that information into the narrative.