

Thriller Tension Planner

Build and control tension across your story

Tension is created by the gap between what characters want and what may prevent them from getting it. Suspense develops when the reader understands that something important is uncertain and wants to know how that uncertainty will be resolved.

Use this planner to examine where tension comes from in your story, how it develops and whether sufficient pressure is being maintained as the narrative progresses.

You do not need to complete every section at once. Use the questions that help you identify what is working, where tension weakens and where greater pressure may be needed.

Story at a Glance

Working Title:

Protagonist:

What does the protagonist want?

What prevents them from getting it?

What is at stake if they fail?

What does the reader fear might happen?

Sources of Tension

Where Does the Pressure Come From?

Strong stories rarely depend on a single source of tension. Identify the pressures acting on your protagonist and consider how those pressures interact.

External Threat

What person, force, situation or event creates immediate danger or opposition?

Internal Conflict

What fear, belief, weakness or contradiction makes the situation harder for the protagonist?

Time Pressure

Is there a deadline, narrowing opportunity or approaching consequence?

Uncertainty

What important information is unknown to the protagonist or reader?

Relationships

Which relationships create competing loyalties, mistrust, vulnerability or conflict?

Consequences

What becomes worse if the protagonist delays, chooses incorrectly or fails?

Which source of tension currently creates the greatest pressure?

Which is weakest and could be developed further?

Scene Tension Tracker

Use this page to compare important scenes or chapters. The aim is not to force every scene to score highly, but to see whether pressure, uncertainty and consequence develop across the story.

Scene / Chapter	Character Goal	Obstacle / Threat	What Does the Reader Know?	Stakes / Consequence	Tension 1-5

After completing the tracker, ask:

- Does tension generally increase as the story progresses?
- Are there several consecutive scenes with little meaningful pressure?
- Does each important scene change the situation in some way?
- Does new information increase uncertainty or merely explain what has already happened?
- Are consequences becoming more serious?
- Where does the reader have the strongest reason to continue?

Potential tension gap:

Possible improvement:

The Tension Audit

Test the Story as a Whole

Use this final check to identify patterns rather than chase a perfect score. A story needs variation, but its major pressures should become more difficult to ignore as the narrative advances.

- The protagonist has a clear objective.
- Failure carries meaningful consequences.
- Opposition prevents easy success.
- The protagonist is forced to make increasingly difficult decisions.
- Important information is revealed deliberately rather than all at once.
- Questions are answered while new questions emerge.
- Periods of reduced tension provide recovery without stopping the story.
- Conflict changes rather than simply repeating.
- Stakes increase as the story develops.
- Choices have consequences.
- Major revelations affect what characters do next.
- The climax resolves pressures developed earlier in the story.

Where is tension strongest? Why?

Where is tension weakest? Why?

What single change could most increase pressure on the protagonist?

Remember: Constant action is not the same as constant tension. A quiet conversation can carry enormous tension when something important is at stake.

Designed to complement *How to Write a Thriller* by Jim Moore.

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