Building Tension

Writing Workshop by Tim Shoemaker

*Workshop Description: If we want readers glued to our story, we need more than good conflict. We must have tension. Let’s look at why tension is essential ... two types of tension you’ll need ... and how to build both.*

***A great story, with great characters, and our protagonist who has a goal. We know we need all of these. Next, we need conflict ... something that threatens to keep our hero from attaining the goal. But CONFLICT ALONE isn’t ENOUGH* to make *READERS* *KEEP READING the story*.If *WE WANT OUR READER GLUED* to the *BOOK?* *WE MUST HAVE TENSION in our STORY.***

**A. TENSION is a 2-Part FORMULA**

***Part ONE*: Readers need to truly *CARE about our CHARACTER*. They need to *LIKE that CHARACTER.* Readers need to truly *UNDERSTAND what that CHARACTER WANTS or NEEDS to the point that THE READERS WANT that TOO*. That is *ALL PART of CARING about that CHARACTER*.**

***Part TWO: Now, we need CONFLICT*. Because our *readers CARE about our CHARACTER*, and they *UNDERSTAND WHAT they WANT and NEED*, They CARE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS.**

**SO, WHEN THERE IS A PROBLEM ...**

* **something that can *THREATEN our CHARACTER* ...**
* **something that can *KEEP THEM from ATTAINING what they NEED or WANT* ... *WE HAVE TENSION—because we CARE about the character ... we feel CLOSE to them.***

**CARING + CONFLICT = TENSION**

**B. YOU MUST *BUILD LIKEABLE CHARACTERS* if you *want your READERS to CARE ABOUT THEM*—and *STAY GLUED to your BOOK.***

***Use ALL the SKILL YOU HAVE* ...**

* **BUILD CHARACTERS your *READERS will LIKE***
* **CHARACTERS your READERS will *CARE ABOUT*.**
* **CHARACTERS with *CLEAR and MEANINGFUL NEEDS & WANTS***

**ONCE YOU HAVE THAT ... your *CONFLICT TRANSFORMS into TENSION***

**C. TWO TYPES of TENSION that YOUR STORY NEEDS**

* **HIGH LEVEL TENSION**
* **LOW LEVEL TENSION**

**HIGH LEVEL:**

* ***ACTION SCENES***
* ***Often Your OPENER* ... that INCITING INCIDENT that pushes your hero over that THRESHOLD into a NO TURNING BACK SITUATION**
* ***RISING DANGER in the PLOT***
* ***SENSE of IMPENDING DOOM***
* ***Usually Your CLIMAX* ... the HIGH STAKES, LIFE & DEATH, DO or DIE SCENES.**

**LOW LEVEL:**

* **MISUNDERSTANDINGS, DIFFERENCES between CHARACTERS**
* **JEALOUSY in early stages**
* **GROWING FEARS, things our character DREADS**
* **DISHONESTY ... some characters not telling the whole truth**
* **OFTEN SUB-PLOT issues ...**

**Your story is a DANCE ... a SKILLFUL BLENDING of *HIGH & LOW LEVEL TENSION*. It’s an ART.**

* ***Too much HIGH LEVEL* and your READERS CAN’T BREATHE. Let them COME UP for AIR.**
* **Too much LOW LEVEL ... and your READERS CAN’T STAY AWAKE.**

**D. BUILD TENSION on PAGE ONE ...**

* ***Tougher to do with a STAND ALONE* ... or *BOOK 1 in a SERIES***
* **Easier with 2ND, 3RD, BOOKS in SERIES ...**

**BUILDING TENSION ... *High or Low Level***

**15 THINGS WE NEED MORE or LESS OF**

**1. Characters need MORE HUNGER …**

* ***Character wanted something all along* … how can you** ***MAKE THEM WANT IT MORE?***

**2. Characters need MORE SKIN in the GAME ...**

* **To *WANT SOMETHING is NOT ENOUGH*.**
* **Have them *STEP UP THEIR GAME* ... have MORE BUY-IN**
* **GIVE your CHARACTER a *HIGHER LEVEL of COMMITMENT*.**

**3. Characters need MORE HURDLES ... and HIGHER ONES ...**

* **If the *things in your hero’s way are BIGGER*, *you’ll create more tension*. Obstacles that are *REASONABLY or EASILY OVERCOME* don’t contribute much tension.**

**4. Characters Need *MORE UNEASINESS WHEN LOOKING AHEAD...***

* **A DARK SENSE of FORESHADOWING ... *an INTUITION***
* **An *UNEASY FEELING*. *A FUNNY FEELING*.**
* ***A WARNING* that *ISN’T TAKEN SERIOUSLY*, but the *READER BELIEVES* *there’s more to it*.**

**5. Characters need MORE VOLTAGE ...**

* **LOW VOLTAGE: If whatever is getting in your PROTAGONISTS way is *SIMPLY A NUISANCE*.**
* **HIGH VOLTAGE: *Parts of the journey could result in PAIN*, *BODILY HARM*, *GREAT LOSS, DEATH*—*before they even get to the goal.***

**6. Readers NEED MORE BELIEVABILITY in the WRITING**

* **UNBELIEVABLE PLOT POINTS, ACTIONS, REACTIONS, DIALOGUE, ABILITIES ... *all of these and more take readers out of the story experience … and it destroys the tension*.**

**7. Sometimes ... READERS NEED MORE BACKSTORY ...**

**Not the FACTS about a person ... *but the DEFINING THINGS*.**

* **WHAT is it in their *past that MAKES them VULNERABLE?***
* **WHAT is the stuff that will *MAKER READERS FEEL for THEM MORE?***
* **WHAT are the things that *MAKE your character an UNDERDOG ... THINGS OTHER CHARACTERS MAY NOT KNOW?***
* **WHAT past history makes *WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW SO MUCH WORSE?***

**8. Readers Need you to ADD MORE HIGH-OCTANE TENSION FUEL**

* ***SECRETS KEPT FROM SOMEONE***
* **FEARS BURIED DEEP**
* ***MISUNDERSTANDINGS***
* ***A RUMOR***
* **SOMETHING LEFT UNSAID**
* ***TOUGH CHOICES* ...**
* ***DOUBTS in SOMEONE CLOSE*—*or in ONESELF***

***9. Readers Need to see MORE of THE CRIMINAL’S MIND ...***

* **YOUR ANTAGONIST ... get in their POV**
* **Show their *MOTIVATION*...**
* **Show their *THOUGHTS ... how their MIND WORKS***
* **Show their *PLANS*.**
* **That adds CREEPINESS to them ... and that adds TENSION to your story ...**

**10. Sometimes readers Need to *HEAR the STORY from MORE POV’s***

* **It’s showing those *MISUNDERSTANDINGS*, *BREWING ANGER*, *SEEDS of JEALOUSY*, and *what’s REALLY GOING on in the HEADS of OTHER CHARACTERS* besides our PROTAGONIST.**

**11. Readers Need *LESS STUTTERING* ...**

* **Stuttering … *remove the REDUNDANCIES*. The *REPETITION*.**
* **If you *go over something too much*, it *LOSES ITS ABILITY TO CREATE TENSION.***

***12. Readers Need LESS PILLOWS for their Heroes ...***

* **Lower the Comfort Factors. *The things that make your character comfortable*.**

**13. Readers Need LESS SUPPORT for their HEROES ... less ALLIES**

* **The more *your protagonist* is *ON THEIR OWN*, the *more they LOSE THE SUPPORT OF FRIENDS AND FAMILY … the more tension*.**

**14. Protagonist needs LESS CHANCE for HAPPILY EVER AFTER ...**

* **Character HAS WANTS … and they should *HAVE NEEDS*.**
* **If it *looks like they can have it all* ... you’ll have *less tension too*.**
* **Give them *Less and less of a CHANCE that THIS CAN ALL WORK OUT.***

**15. Protagonist needs TO MAKE MORE SACRIFICES**

* **WHAT WILL your Character GO FOR … and *WHAT will they HAVE TO GIVE UP TO DO THAT?***
* **You can create TENSION in a story with the dynamics of LOVE and SACRIFICE.**

**ALL THESE THINGS ADD DELICIOUS TENSION!!**

*Thanks for joining us today!! Keep writing good, clean, excellent fiction!! -Tim Shoemaker* [*www.timshoemaker.com*](http://www.timshoemaker.com)