



17-POINT THRILLER CHECKLIST

Put these items on your thriller checklist and you'll not only deliver what your audience is expecting, but you'll have a more complete story as well.



#1

THE MAIN CHARACTER

The main character needs to have an important goal and motivation to accomplish it. There is much to lose! And we like the hero or heroine. Even though they may have faults, we root for them.

#2

INCREASING DANGER

At some point, the threat of a larger disaster interrupts the main character's focus on their own life and requires them to change direction.

#3

KEEP IT MOVING

The threat must be riveting. Intriguing, compelling and cinematic. A thriller is a page-turner, so something's got to happen on every page, and make a promise for the next one.



#4

MORE THAN PERSONAL DANGER

The goal—to stop the threat—is bigger than the main character’s personal life. If not derailed, the danger would affect many more people.

#5

SACRIFICE

At some point, the main character must give up a personal need or desire in order to protect others. Even better—at some point, that personal sacrifice exposes a previously unrealized personal goal.

#6

HIGH STAKES

The danger is widespread and if it continues, it would be devastating. The stakes are indisputably high. The protagonist is afraid, or if you’ve got a Reacher, at least aware they could die.

#7 BIG SETTING

Give yourself a big canvas. Of course it's your book, but a classic thriller would likely not take place in a picturesque little village. If it does, maybe the antagonist has bigger plans?

#8 FIGHT FAIR

The antagonist is as smart as the protagonist. The battle must be between equals—a one-sided battle of wits and intelligence is not suspenseful.

#9 USE THE CLOCK

The clock is constantly ticking. Deadlines, ultimatums, demands. “Or else” plays a big role. There's little room for phrases like: “two weeks later,” or “after a leisurely dinner.” The necessity for action is unforgiving and relentless. “What will happen next?” should be the top of mind for the reader. You won't use much reflection, internal dialogue, or complicated backstory. Advance the plot.



#11 A GOOD BAD GUY


The antagonist sincerely believes the goal is worthwhile and logical. The antagonist may be charismatic, and even sympathetic. Their motivation is stated and eventually clear, and twistedly understandable.

#10 CONFLICT CONFLICT CONFLICT

That's the engine that's going to keep your story flying. Here's a progression to consider: Goal, motivation, obstacle, success, disaster, decision, success, disaster. And then again.

#12 DON'T CHEAT

The author gets one coincidence—one canceled flight, one dead phone battery, one old friend just happening to show up. The march of the plot must be believable and realistic.



#13

STAY SMART

The protagonist must not make any move that results in the reader saying “no one would do that!” The protagonist must remain reasonable and determined—except when it comes to whatever their personal stake is. But even then, the reader must understand the decision.

#15

BIG FINISH

There’s a big high-stakes climax. Often this requires another big sacrifice or a relinquishing of a long-believed goal or necessity. The protagonist’s life changes in some way.

#14

THE REVERSAL

At some point, the antagonist turns his/her focus from the major goal to stopping the protagonist. This is a key moment in the book—where the characters (and the readers) understand that the outcome could go either way. Still, the reader wants the good guys to win. They have to, or else all is lost.



#16

HEART

For the main character and for the reader, there's not only a satisfying sense of accomplishment, but also a personal reckoning and understanding.

#17

SUBGENRE?

If it's a medical thriller, or a political thriller, or a financial thriller, the same exciting conventions apply. Smart protagonist, equally smart antagonist, highest possible stakes. Your setting will be determined by your subgenre choice.



Reference:

Career Authors - Hank Phillippi Ryan

