



TENSION

Lesson 2 Workbook

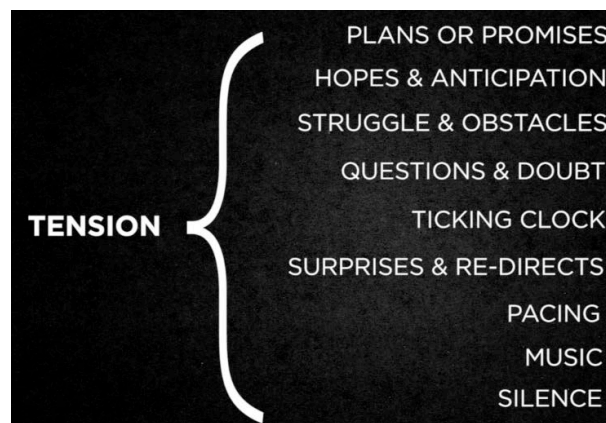
LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will begin understanding how engagement is created by tension. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify many types of tension across a variety of storytelling styles as well as have practical tools to manufacture tension into your stories whenever you like.

OVERVIEW

Tension is the secret to keeping your audiences engaged in your stories. Tension means "the act of being stretched tight", and as far as storytelling goes, it exists whenever a question, hope, or expectation is created in the audience. They have half of the information -- now they want to know the punchline.

Tension isn't just used in storytelling - it's everywhere. Used in basically everything that's designed to keep you addicted. From apps like Instagram or Gmail to headlines in the news to the way your web pages scroll, tension is designed to keep you engaged. So why not use it in your stories to keep your audience hooked?



The list above begins to cover different ways to create tension. It's really tools to get your audience to ask a question or create anticipation in them. If stories do all the work for them and answer every question right away, then they won't have reason to engage in the story. But the more you can design ongoing tension creators throughout your storytelling, the more your audience will want to stick around and find out what happens.

Tension is in plotting, it's in framing of shots, it's in how your characters speak (or don't!) -- everything can be made to not give away all of the information at once. Think of watching a scene where you see a reaction from a mother who looks offscreen - and suddenly looks horrified! -- even if just for just a split second, we wonder, WHAT DOES SHE SEE? This would not be accomplished in a wide shot where both the reaction and the object of the reaction are shown simultaneously.

Sidenote I need to stress further for those writing fiction: **main characters must make decisions**. Make them have to decide between at least two outcomes. This is inherent tension that allows them to evolve and begins to reveal character. Too many scripts, books and first time writers create stories where plot simply happens to the passive main character. Don't do this! Make sure you're giving your character choices that helps them be an active part of the story.

LINKS

TENSION IN GOODFELLAS

Notice how many different types of tension there are in this scene – bonus points for editor Thelma Schoonmaker for cutting the most tense car braking montage ever – look at how many cuts are used to create it! It's only 2 seconds long but milks it for tension.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qtbGjXZlts>

BILLY WILDER EXPLAINS THE LUBITSCH TOUCH

Billy Wilder (one of my favorite directors of all time) explains the unique style of one of my other favorite directors of all time, Ernst Lubitsch. The Lubitsch Touch is explained perfectly here -- it's a unique form of tension that uses wit and irony to intensify the tension. Enjoy!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jOVRKzwURY>

TENSION IN SHAUN OF THE DEAD

*This is one of my favorite movies - both scary, fun and intensely cool. Earlier in the movie, the main character Shaun does his non-eventful daily walk to the market (thus creating an expectation!). But after zombies take over London, he still has no idea when he does his walk to the store, missing every single clue along the way that the audience definitely knows -- the residing question **WHEN WILL HE FIGURE THIS OUT?!** Also, the fact that the main chunk of this scene is shot in one single take adds to the tension, just brilliantly executed. Hope you enjoy this!*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqQ8Y9Sjp7o>

“THE SANDWICH GENERATION” - 4 minute podcast story

My 4 minute winning podcast submission to KCRW's 24 hour radio race

KCRW is a great public radio station in Los Angeles – every year they announce a theme on a Saturday at noon, then by Sunday at noon, creators have to deliver a <4min podcast around that theme. Last year, the announced the theme (“THE NEW NORMAL”) and out of over 500 submissions, I was lucky to win! I credit tension with the ability to create a story under a deadline – always thinking “how can I evoke a question to form in my audience’s mind and withholding the payoff?” Listen to the piece and discover how questions or anticipation are created at every turn.

<https://soundcloud.com/queensncowboys/the-new-normal-v1-aiff>

CREATING YOUR OWN TENSION

Let's start having fun with creating your own tension. Remember, tension can be in anything -- characters, scenarios, plotting, music -- any opposing force that works against the goals or intention of your story and/or main character.

There's a great doc about how SOUTH PARK gets made every single week (think about that for a second)-- it's a wild and worthwhile watch. It's called SIX DAYS TO AIR where SOUTH PARK creators Tre Parker and Matt Stone reveal the secret to their writing process, which is that **everything is either an "AND" a "BUT" or a "THEREFORE"**.

For example, "the farmer wants to marry the king's daughter AND rule the kingdom, BUT he is too poor for her to consider him as a suitor, THEREFORE the farmer steals from an expensive men's clothing shop so he can disguise himself as a rich man.... BUT little does he know, the store owner knows the farmer stole. AND to make matters worse, the store owner knows the king personally.... etc"

See how easy it is to string together a scenario when those three bridge words help create juxtaposition, which is another word for tension. "AND" is there to raise the stakes, "BUT" is there to reverse expectations of your plot or character, and "THEREFORE" is the logical but perhaps harebrained solution that arises which creates your scenario. Beware of not stringing together too many "ANDs" without reversing the expectations of your audience or your story may fall flat.

1) Start by creating three one-line plots for three different stories you're trying to create:

2) Next, pick your favorite plot line, and now who is the central character? What do they want? What's standing in their way? What's their arc? Use "AND" "BUT" and "THEREFORE" to create tension and write out the summary of who they are and what their journey is:

3) Now, pick one moment from your character's journey, and create a scene that is centered around tension. Think about location, timing, and what's standing in their way to help create a realistic scenario that drives the plot forward. One idea: what's the last thing your main character would want to happen right now? Can you somehow manifest it into their life and get them out of it?

Great job so far! You do that a few more times and you've got yourself an award-winning story! Keep identifying tension around you and looking for ways to manufacture the opposing and unexpected in your storytelling and you're well on your way.