How Writers Build Tension and Suspense in Stories

KS3 ENGLISH CREATIVE WRITING LITERARY TECHNIQUES Ages 11-14 ⏰ 3 min read

What is Tension and Suspense?

Tension and **suspense** are techniques that make readers feel excited, worried, or curious about what happens next. They're the feelings that make you unable to put a book down because you need to know what occurs. Good writers create these feelings on purpose to keep their audience entertained and engaged.

Think of it like waiting for the last present on Christmas morning — you know something exciting is coming, but you don't know what it is yet.

Keeping Secrets from the Reader

One powerful technique is **withholding information**. Writers don't tell readers everything they know. Instead, they reveal details slowly, piece by piece. A character might know something dangerous is happening, but the reader doesn't find out until later. This gap between what characters know and what readers know creates curiosity.

For example, a detective story works because we don't know who committed the crime. The writer gives us clues gradually, and we're desperate to solve the mystery before the ending.

Using Cliffhangers

A **cliffhanger** is when a chapter or scene ends with something unresolved or shocking. The reader is left wondering: "What happens next?" This technique makes people keep reading because they cannot stand not knowing.

Think of it like your friend telling you a gossip story and stopping right at the most exciting part — you'd beg them to continue!

Building Obstacles and Challenges

Writers create **obstacles** that stop characters from reaching their goals easily. If a hero wants to escape a locked room, the reader worries they might not make it. If characters are being chased, we fear they'll be caught. These problems make readers feel tense because they care about whether the character succeeds.

Using Time Pressure

Stories become more exciting when time is running out. Maybe a bomb will explode in **ten minutes**, or a deadline is approaching. **Time pressure** forces characters to act quickly and makes readers anxious because there's limited time for things to go wrong.

Creating Dangerous or Uncertain Situations

When readers don't know if characters are safe, they feel suspenseful. Writers describe strange noises, odd behaviour, or threatening environments. Readers become nervous because danger might be lurking around the corner.

The best writers combine several of these techniques together, layering them to create a powerful story that keeps you reading late into the night!

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