

CHAPTER FIVE

TENSION

Writers use tension to make their work more readable, and more meaningful, and more interesting. Writers hook a reader into a piece by paying attention to energy and images. To keep this reader engaged, delighted, and connected to your writing, manipulate the level of tension.

Tension is defined as trouble on the page. Tension is conflict; it's a technique a writer uses to keep readers a bit off balance, making them guess, forcing them to wait, allowing them to worry, or to wonder, or to hope.

There is a lot of beautiful writing that simply does not hold the reader's interest. Tension allows you to make sure *everything* you write has enough pull to keep your reader with you for the whole ride.

*There are no dull subjects.
There are only dull writers.*

— H.L. MENCKEN

THE PRINCIPLES OF TENSION

Desire + Danger = Tension

To make sure your writing has enough tension to keep a reader engaged, focus on your character/speaker's main desire: Keep every sentence, line, or stanza in the piece *closely* focused on what this person wants, and what forces are keeping her from getting it. Usually, the writer presents the desire both externally and internally. The character or speaker wants a ride to the concert, drugs for her sick child, or quieter kids. Externally, we see her trying to get the thing she wants by her actions. Internally, her thoughts reveal the significance and the conflicts her desire holds. She hopes to meet her ex-boyfriend at the concert, she hopes her child will grow up to be a doctor, she wants the children to spend more time with their father.

If there is no danger, if nothing *bad* will happen if she doesn't get what she wants, you have no tension. If the kid just has a mild case of the sniffles, the reader is going to wonder why you are making him read about this kid. If meeting the ex-boyfriend doesn't hold the promise of a life-altering interaction — she wants to go back to him and desert her husband (her desire + her danger) — why drag the reader along through a tedious explanation of who Ellen is, who Joey is, why set the scene in the restaurant, why bother at all?

When you combine desire (the thing a character or speaker wants — connection, money, to score points, to not be stupid) and danger (the potential harm that will come to the person — rejection, a scam, loss, shame), you automatically create tension.

Desire without danger is boring. Beautiful, perhaps. But boring.

Danger without an individual character's strong focused clear desire is perhaps exciting, but only for a short time.

Consider these situations.

1. It's the first day of the last semester of your college career. You are wait-listed for three classes: Math, Physics, and Biology. The registrar's office: inconveniently closed the entire break. You need all three of these classes in order to graduate. On your schedule, you have one class only, Tennis, and you do not need this elective, not at all. You can't afford a fifth year. When you arrive at the math and science building, there is a line of a hundred students, jamming the front doors, spilling out onto the lawn. Every single student has an add slip. Every student needs Math.

Desire to Graduate + Horrendous Drop/Add = Drama
Tension.

A boy wakes up, wonders what he will do that day, eats a nice breakfast, strolls down the sidewalk to school. Gets there safely. Recess goes well.

No Desire (mild wish to get to school) + Safe Arrival = Boring
No tension.

2. You are dating two people. Both of them live in the same building, Joey on the floor above you, Carlo just underneath you. They don't know about each other. Both Joey and Carlo have declared themselves loyal to you, and you have promised each, in the heat of the moment, that he is The One. Every time you walk into that building, you feel it: tension. Tonight both Carlo and Joey meet you at the mailboxes. It's clear they have been talking. Joey has a knife in his hand. Carlo is holding a letter, thwapping it against his flat palm.

Desire for Joey (the only one") +
Tension.

A man looks at of his life. The luxu realizes he has lived turns on the classic dow at a beautiful great.

Happy Man +
No tension.

3. You work twenty-t child could do. You checking and your count was frozen spend Friday evenir is pissed you're miss sage, and she can p declined, of course home to your mo *much* higher GPA t you over. Seventy-f

Desire to Be a and Lack of At
Tension.

It's hard to create t strong unmet desire aⁱ versely.

Your obstacles — tl fields. Often it is the su The low-level constant hungry, bored. The kir keys, get a flat, are serv your boss says, No, yc the Miller file. It's not feeds the pulse of tensi
It's the little stuff.

Desire for Joey + Desire for Carlo + Assurances That Are Lies ("You are the only one") + Human Propensity Toward Jealousy, Violence = Drama
Tension.

A man looks around his room, remembering all the pleasant moments of his life. The luxurious autos, the silk suits, the comfortable gardens. He realizes he has lived well. He has worked hard, and it has been worth it. He turns on the classical station, sits on a large leather sofa, stares out the window at a beautiful view. His nice wife brings him a gin and tonic. It tastes great.

Happy Man + All Desires Fulfilled = Boring
No tension.

3. You work twenty-nine hours a week. You despise this job, which a small child could do. You are behind in all your classes. You have nineteen cents in checking and your Visa is maxed out, and two payments behind—the account was frozen this morning. You are driving home—speeding—to spend Friday evening with your mother, who has a bad heart; your girlfriend is pissed you're missing her sorority social; you told her you bought her a corsage, and she can pick it up at the florists right about now, but your card was declined, of course—there is no corsage at Julie's Flowers for her. You race home to your mother worrying about your midterm grades; you need a *much* higher GPA to compete for a good job upon graduation. The cops pull you over. Seventy-five in a thirty.

Desire to Be a Good Son and Boyfriend + No Money, Bad Grades and Lack of Attention to Posted Speed Limits = Drama
Tension.

It's hard to create tension without focusing your reader's attention on *both* a strong unmet desire *and* risk factors—the *problems*—that will affect him adversely.

Your obstacles—the risk factors—needn't be murders, car chases, or battlefields. Often it is the subtle, tiny annoyances that actually create the most tension. The low-level constant needs children present, climaxing when they get tired, hungry, bored. The kind of day where you lose your keys, get a flat, are served with a speeding ticket, and your boss says, No, you can't have that extension on the Miller file. It's not life-or-death drama that truly feeds the pulse of tension.

It's the little stuff.

Art disturbs, science reassures.
— GEORGES BRAQUE

In this chapter, you'll learn to practice paying attention to what *increases* tension. And you will learn a few tricks for avoiding the things that kill tension (explanation, clichés, generalizing, distance).

PRACTICE

Desire + Danger = Drama. Write 5 to 10 tension "formulas," the essential conflicts for potential stories, poems, essays, or plays. Be radical, weird, wonderful, serious, or silly: You are just swinging your racket here, getting loose, getting a feel for the nature of tension. For example: Girl wants to be free of her mother and grow up and have fun + Mother is overbearing and whole town watches her every move = "Girl" — a mother versus daughter showdown: Will she rebel? Or obey?

PRACTICE

Read Ethan Canin's "Fly-Fishing for Doctors" on page 196. Try a few formulas where you spell out Desire + Danger = Drama for this creative nonfiction; what are the dangers, the desires, and the drama here? How is the drama made interesting to the reader?

Setting the Thermostat: The Four Elements of Tension

Read the following example, and rate the tension level on a scale of 1 to 5:

I wake up when my alarm goes off and I get out of bed. It's 7:47 a.m. I can't believe I have to go to work. I get dressed, and drive—the traffic is terrible. I get out of my car and stand on the gravel. I see my aunt waiting for me. She is wearing tan clam-diggers and her black shirt complements her dark olive skin and her black hair. Her Teva-saddled feet are next to a white ball. Sneaky sees me, his stomach hanging down to his hind legs. When he reaches me I pick him up. Marilyn says hey I'm glad you made it. I'm just glad I am not late.

Sanity is madness put to good uses.

— GEORGE SANTAYANA

The piece seems fine, in many ways. It's showing action, describing people, including setting, staying in one point of view. The characters are doing things. But somehow, the piece falls flat. Not a lot is happening. The narrator is late, but what are the consequences? Will anything *result* from these events? Is there any danger, really? A true problem?

A person wakes up, goes to work, finds her aunt, and collects a dog into her arms.

Readers say: So what? Why are you telling me this?

You don't ever want the reader saying, "How is this?" How do you move through the piece. The tension or decreasing it. You

PRACTICE

Read the story "What I Saw" of the three most tense scenes contrast of the tension in "Sleep" on page 125. W

Compare the passage to the first paragraph from

Dulcie is afraid of ever she wants, and as if she's driving past week was miles from surface streets.

There is more tension in this passage

First of all, a woman little bit of tension—"girl" or "a man") is afraid

Dulcie drives the something. *To avoid the home?*

The "I" (the narrator) That makes us tense. the narrator: the fear with her?

Three simple sentences character's desire, which with a problem.

To establish the tension something rather than telling what she wants.

to what *increases* tensions that kill tension (ex-

sential conflicts for political, serious, or silly: You define the nature of tension. You have fun + Mother is mother versus daughter

with formulas where you state what are the dangers, the tension to the reader?

f Tension

scale of 1 to 5:

It's 7:47 a.m. I can't get through traffic. The traffic is terrible. I'm stuck on the gravel. I see a car wearing tan clamps. It complements her dark hair. Her Teva-saddled neaky sees me, his hand on me. I pick him up. Not late.

When describing people, what characters are doing things. What is the narrator late, but what are the events? Is there any

effects a dog into her

You don't ever want your reader saying "So what?" You always want your reader saying, "How is this going to turn out? What happens next?"

How do you move from "So what?" to "what's next"? Set the thermostat. One person wants something strongly *and is not able to get it*. Right away, and all through the piece. Then, immediately, you change the level of tension, increasing or decreasing it. You *change* the thermostat. And never let your reader go.

PRACTICE

Read the story "What I Saw from Where I Stood" by Marisa Silver on page 167. Make a list of the three most tense scenes or sections in the story. Then write a short comparison/contrast of the tension in the opening of this short story and Akhil Sharma's "Surrounded by Sleep" on page 125. Which is the more tension-filled opening? Why?

Blog

Compare the passage above, about the alarm clock going off, a first paragraph, to the first paragraph from Marisa Silver's story, "What I Saw from Where I Stood":

Dulcie is afraid of freeways. She doesn't like not being able to get off whenever she wants, and sometimes I catch her holding her breath between exits, as if she's driving past a graveyard. So, even though the party we went to last week was miles from our apartment in Silver Lake, we drove home on the surface streets.

There is more tension here than in the first example. What contributes to the tension in this passage?

First of all, a woman named Dulcie (and just naming a character creates a little bit of tension—we will invest more in someone with a name than in "the girl" or "a man") is afraid. There is a *clear threat*. Weird, but clear: freeways.

Dulcie drives the other person in the story home the long way. She wants something. *To avoid something? To extend her time with the driver? To delay going home?*

The "I" (the narrator) catches Dulcie "holding her breath." Dulcie's tense. That makes us tense. Plus, we worry about the effect of all of Dulcie's desires on the narrator: the fear of freeways, the route demands, her anxiety. What is *up* with her?

Three simple sentences. Quite a bit of tension. How? The focus is on the character's desire, which is used to set the thermostat: create heat. Start your piece with a problem.

To establish the tension temperature we need: a person; the person wanting something rather strongly; and finally, something keeping that person from getting what she wants.

In chart form, it looks like this.

The Four Elements of Tension

Component	Considerations
1. PERSON: A person with a problem	Be specific. Provide age, station in life, situation, location, cultural/social information.
2. DESIRE: The person wants something specific—has a strong desire.	What the person wants drives the entire passage. Ideally, the character/speaker has an external, physical desire that parallels or contrasts with an interior, psychological need.
3. STAKES: What the person wants is very important—it has to matter to her, greatly.	What is at stake for this person? What if she doesn't get what she wants? How bad will it be? Whatever she wants, she needs to want it <i>a lot</i> , even (especially) if it is a little thing. If your character doesn't care about what happens, the reader won't.
4. OBSTACLES: The person has to be thwarted by obstacles that keep her from getting what she wants. Obstacles can be opponents (another person or people interfering with the goal), or forces (grief, fear, weather, etc.). Obstacles need to be realistic, meaningful, and have consequences.	When the person gets what she wants, the piece is over, the tension is resolved. During the piece, don't let the character get what she wants and/or keep creating new needs, new wants. Your job as a writer is to move her closer to her need and then either further way, or have the meeting of the need create a new desire.

PRACTICE

Find the four components of “setting the thermostat” in a section of the Marisa Silver story “What I Saw from Where I Stood” on page 167. What tension(s) are set in the section of the story? Use the chart above to create an analysis of the four elements of tension.

In Silver's story, “What I Saw from Where I Stood,” Dulcie wants to manage her fears. She wants to be happy again (interior psychological wants). This is a high-value desire: She might ruin her relationships, asking too much of those who

love her. She might never get what she wants—the bad thing she wants is completely and utterly bad. Fear and despair is as strong as hope in this situation.

Notice that in this story, the tension starts bad—fear of high stakes. As the tension increases, the stakes go above, notice that in addition, the party is far away (higher tension one notch at a time).

Narrative poetry (poetry) expresses a single feeling in a specific order to set the thermostat.

PRACTICE

Read Thomas Lux's poem, “Your Ball,” on page 179 and consider how the components from the chart apply to this poem.

In Thomas Lux's poem “Your Ball,” the battle is between a man who lives to mow and a man who lives to play. The stakes are high (the kids go to jail). The balls keep going out, the tension inherent in the old guy who *doesn't* mow. You aren't supposed to play. What are the real direct rules? In this poem, the tension is set and baseball.

MAINTAINING TENSION

Work with Two or Three

Never work with one character, so that you don't tend to rely on thoughts and feelings. Tension with a character

love her. She might never recover from grief. What she wants—the bad things to not have happened—is completely and utterly not-gettable. The force of despair is as strong as her desire to change her life situation.

One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.

— FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Notice that in this short story, as in most, things start bad—fear of highways—and the writer keeps giving more information that *increases* the tension. Moving in closely again on that excerpted passage, above, notice that in addition to the highway fear, Dulcie holds her breath. The party is far away (higher stakes). Notice how Silver, the writer, is dialing up the tension one notch at a time, one sentence at a time.

Narrative poetry (poetry that tells a story, as opposed to lyric poetry, which expresses a single feeling or emotion) also uses the components of tension in order to set the thermostat, and keep reader interest high.

PRACTICE

Read Thomas Lux’s poem, “The Man into Whose Yard You Should Not Hit Your Ball,” on page 179 and consider how he balances the forces of tension. Does he use all four components from the chart on page 146? Find words or phrases that support each component.

In Thomas Lux’s poem, “The Man into Whose Yard You Should Not Hit Your Ball,” the battle is the kids’ joy and sheer love for baseball versus a mean old man who lives to mow. That’s a good battle: fun wild kids, grumpy guy. And the stakes are high (the kids could get in a lot of trouble, the guy has a daughter in jail). The balls keep going over there. Lux does a brilliant job sustaining, drawing out, the tension inherent in this battle. At the end of the poem, we learn that it’s the old guy who *doesn’t follow the rules*, doesn’t read “the manual” for his lawnmower. You aren’t supposed to mow up balls and make them into “coleslaw.” What are the real directions here? the poet asks. Who was really breaking the rules? In this poem, the kids win. Score one for youthful passion and freedom and baseball.

MAINTAINING TENSION

Work with Two or Three Characters

Never work with one character who is alone. Always work with two or three characters, so that you can have “sides.” When you write just one person, you tend to rely on thoughts, because there can be nothing at stake. It’s hard to create tension with a character alone onstage, lost in thought. There’s not a lot to see

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there. There's not much we can really engage with as readers. Solo is boring. Two's a game. Three is always interesting—because there is so much more opportunity for *problems* to arise.

Match Your Opponents

When do you leave a game early, before the final score? When it's clear one side will win. Nothing is at stake in the fourth period when the score is 108–15. As a writer, the same rule applies. You will lose your reader unless you keep the stakes high.

The “sides,” the power struggle—the thing the person wants and the thing keeping her from getting it—have to be equally matched.

Power shifts generate and sustain tension. Review our formula for creating tension:

A person who wants something important badly, who is experiencing difficult obstacles that are keeping him/her from getting the things he/she wants.

Think of a sporting match. A good game. What do you notice? There are *two sides*. If your team goes out on the field to practice, the group doesn't pretend to have a game *against no one*. You divide up, shirts and skins. You *have to have sides*.

In a great game, a really tense match, the kind you stay into triple overtime in pouring rain to see finalized, the sides are evenly matched—it's not going to be a blowout.

Super close. Triple overtime. We in the stands are on the edges of our seats, worrying the whole time. *Who is going to win?* And, more importantly, *how are they going to get from where they are now to that win?* Each play is riveting. Every step, every pass, every glance matters.

If you are on the winning team, a blowout can be fun, but not for the spectators (i.e., the readers). For them, there is no tension. You don't want to be

the writer having all the fun—the piece *has* to work for the readers.

In “What I Saw from Where I Stood,” grief is a worthy opponent. Charles uses his love for Dulcie to combat Grief. For Dulcie, Grief keeps taking form: first the hoodlums, then the pestilence. We don't know if she—and she and her partner—will make it or not. That's the tension in the story. Dulcie and Charlie are good and young and strong. But they have been hit hard. Will they make it?

That's the tension. To find out the answer to that question, we track the battle that is the story. Even the title indicates this is a report from the frontlines, an eyewitness account.

PRACTICE

Read the play excerpt by A
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Stay Specific

Generalizations kill ten-
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newbies. However, there's

Dimension means contradiction.

— ROBERT MCKEE

PRACTICE

Read the play excerpt by Anna Deavere Smith on page 56. Find the four elements of tension in the monologue. What are the opposing forces? Remember, the “battle” can be between two people or two forces. Both of them, on some level, must be right.

Stay Specific

Generalizations kill tension. Another habit writers accidentally fall into is writing *general* instead of writing *specific*. “They fought” sums up what happened; no tension there. The summary gives a general impression, and will never be as tense and interesting as us getting to see the specifics of *how*. “Carlo sliced the letter across Joey’s face, and the papercut beaded blood drops on Joey’s pale cheek.”

Compare “it was such a drag driving across town and always boring” to the paragraph detailing Dulcie’s highway avoidance rituals. Detail—getting very specific—is actually a method you use to create and sustain tension.

Robert Kurson, author of *Shadow Divers*, employs this principle. He avoids the general and always names the specifics, which increases the tension in his award-winning writing. Notice how the visual details, the images, increase the tension in this piece.

A good diver reveals himself in the way he gears up. He is at one with his equipment. He knows where every piece goes; every strap is the perfect length, every tool expertly placed, and everything fits. He moves instinctively, his hands and stuff in a swoop-tug-and-click ballet until he is transformed into sea creature. He rarely needs help. If another diver moves to assist him, he will usually decline, saying, “No, thank you” or, more likely, “Don’t touch my shit.” He favors ten-dollar knives over the hundred-dollar versions because when he loses the cheaper ones, he does not feel obligated, under the pressure of narcosis, to risk his life searching the bottom to rescue them. He cares nothing for the prettiness of his gear, and often tattoos it with patches, stickers, and graffiti that testify to past dive exploits. Neon colors do not exist for him; greenhorns who choose those hues don’t have to wait long before hearing the boat’s opinion on such loudness. When he is fully geared up, a good wreck diver looks like a German car engine; more ordinary divers resemble the interior of a child’s toy chest.

Kurson could simply say that professional wreck divers relate to their equipment differently than amateur divers. The “versus” is implied: good divers versus newbies. However, there’s not a lot of tension there. The fight isn’t really equal; of

The business of the novelist is not to chronicle great events, but to make small ones interesting.

— ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

course the better divers are *better*. To keep the tension in this passage high, Kurson uses specifics. We see that the quirks of the great divers all have a reason, an important reason. The better divers are smart. They're odd, they're messy, they're arrogant ("Don't touch my shit"). They have to be, in order to survive. The same specific qualities that aid them in getting dressed, on land, Kurson shows us, are the very ones that let them live while others may die.

PRACTICE

Turn back to the memoir excerpt on page 60, from Amy Fusselman's *The Pharmacist's Mate*. How many specifics do you find? List each specific word or phrase. Then, write a brief response explaining how six of these specifics work to increase the tension. Lastly, identify places tension would be lost or decreased without the specifics.

Write from Close-Up

He sat in the room for a long time.

What do you see in that sentence? What image appears in your mind's eye? What do you feel about the "he"? Anything at all?

The writer of this sentence has *generalized* time (it's a "long" time, but we have no idea *how* long and, more important, *when*.) The writer has also *generalized space*. It's just generally a room. There's no situation. There's not actual space we can touch and move around in.

There is no tension because *there's nothing there*.

Write from close-up. Be in the time—the exact moment—and the space—Apartment 4D, Sunset Heights, golden retriever and girlfriend on sofa—you are writing.

Distance kills tension. You want to avoid distance. Write from a close-up position, tight with your characters, the details, and the emotion; not from too far back. Your images training in the first unit has prepared you to write from *within* the experience, not hovering above, a reporter, or hiding behind the veil of time.

Many beginning writers write as though they are on a stage. The audience—the reader—is looking at the curtain, waiting for it to rise. But the beginning writer tends, often, to report to the audience—so that the play is going on behind the curtain. The writer sees it, and explains what is happening back there. This is not very pleasurable for the audience. We want the intermediary removed.

When you write, move closer, and you will increase the tension every time. Be in the room with the famous musician; be in the yard that is forbidden, looking for your lost baseball; be driving with your grieving girlfriend; clueless as to

what to do next. Don't look back, remember! Write from a few inches

MANIPULATING

A lot of what you are doing is a piece of creative writing work against each other, telling her husband she's parents while carefully alogue shows us he just

In each of these cases, working with exterior characters within characters.

The good guy has a germophobe. The bad guy is a strategist and usually gets tates to make decisions. He's able to connect with his work on us.

Consider the power of a smile when you play with business next to delight next to nothing for the reader.

You create tension with other: adorable kittens, a brother in trouble, a ne

Three useful strategies: the "thermostat"—the obvious, which allow you to go from simple to the complex (stating the obvious); and create the oppositions and

Thermostat Control

The secret to creating tension and downs are much harder (nature) than a steadily aw

what to do next. Don't write *about* the experience, or you kill the tension. Don't look back, remember, think, or reflect: *Stay in the moment*. And stay close-in. Write from a few inches away from your subject.

MANIPULATING TENSION

A lot of what you are doing when you work to create or increase the tension in a piece of creative writing is *creating oppositions*. That is, you set qualities in the work against each other. A beautiful beach scene is the location for a woman telling her husband she wants a divorce. A boy tells a girl how much he hates his parents while carefully cleaning out the family garage, devoted to his task (his dialogue shows us he just wants to look cool in front of the girl).

In each of these cases, the setting and the action clash. Tension is created by working with exterior visual oppositions. But, oppositions also must be created within characters.

The good guy has to have some weaknesses. Seinfeld is a neat-freak and germophobe. The bad team has to have some good traits. Newman is a brilliant strategist and usually gets what he wants. Hamlet is kind and insightful but hesitates to make decisions. The Joker is evil, but very, very funny. Readers have to be able to connect with both "good" and "bad" characters in order for the piece to work on us.

Consider the power of juxtaposition. If the kittens are terribly cute, and you smile when you play with them, and their ribbons are pink, you are putting cuteness next to delight next to adorableness—there's not any surprise there. There's nothing for the reader to engage with. No tension.

You create tension when you put things that don't rest easily next to each other: adorable kittens, deep rejection, your angry mother. A broken barrette, a brother in trouble, a new car, the perfect pizza. A great date, a car accident.

Three useful strategies help you create and sustain tension in a piece of writing: the "thermostat"—the amount of tension in any given line or sentence; layers, which allow you to create and increase tension by moving your work from the simple to the complex (e.g., more than one thing is going on at once; you aren't stating the obvious); and, dialogue, used in special ways. All three strategies help create the oppositions and layers that make creative writing interesting to read.

Thermostat Control: Adjusting the Temperature

The secret to creating tension, in life and on the page, is to *vary the situation*. Ups and downs are much harder for us (and therefore much more successful in literature) than a steadily awful time. If things go from bad to worse, we can usually

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adapt. What drives us to the brink of madness is when the situation is bad (the line for Math Add is terrifically long), but it improves (Joe lets us cut ahead of him in line), and then gets worse (the Drop/Add people are leaving for lunch *just* when you get to the front of the line), and then much worse (your two boyfriends show up at the Drop/Add counter to confront you, loudly).

And then better.

Then worse.

In real life it's called "Being jerked around."

Tension is: ups and downs, back and forth, tension and the release of tension. This up-and-down is the rhythm of creative writing. Change appeals to our basic need for stimulation. Don't let your reader adapt. Once he gets the emotional tenor of one line, you have to change it up again. Be thoughtfully unpredictable. Don't let your piece remain at the same tension level for long.

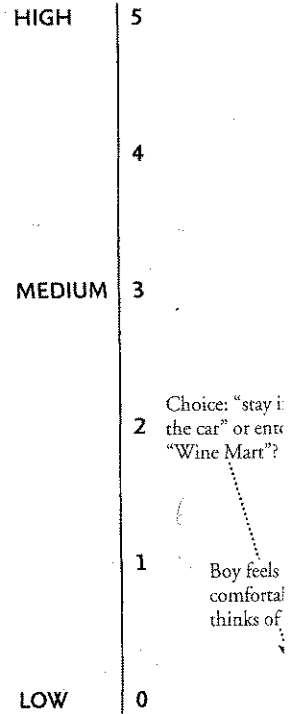
Reread the poem "Buying Wine" by Sebastian Matthews (p. 53). Notice the tension level in the first stanza. A choice is always imbued with some tension; here the choice is backseat or Wine Mart. Each one has plusses and minuses. Arbitrarily, somewhat, we could assign a number to that level of tension, on a scale of 1 to 5. Let's say it's a 2. Because the speaker in the poem is a child, either choice is at least a little scary.

In the second stanza, the tension goes down — the boy is in the store, trailing Dad, and things look good, orderly, even familiar, "like bat racks." The tension is perhaps a 1. And not for long. In stanza three, the cart is "ever-filling" — and this is not good and it's getting worse because the father is "unkempt" and pretty much flinging liquor into the cart in the aisle. Tension in stanzas three through five could be said to dial up quickly; 2, 3, then 4. In stanza five, Matthews ratchets the tension meter back down — the speaker, a child, sees his father shopping here as he shops at the meat store. Things are okay, aren't they? We're just shopping for food. It's good to match wines and food, put a pinot grigio with scallops . . . right? The tension dances down to near 1.

Notice the leap that occurs between stanzas seven and eight. While the boy is adjusting to his father's wine-shopping ritual, he slips into a reverie, remembering other wine store trips where he made the other choice, and stayed in the car. Whenever a writer switches locations, pops into a flashback, moving back in time and space, the reader experiences a tension shift. "Often, we'd stay in the car" moves the tension from 1 back up to 2 or 3, and then in the second line of stanza eight — notice the tension shift in that "dwindling capacity to believe our father" comment. Boom. This isn't a kid who still worships his dad. This is a kid who has been disappointed by this dad many, many times. That statement charges the poem with energy, intensity.

That intensity is increased — to a 5, perhaps, on the tension meter — in the next stanza, where the kids in the back seat are imagined as free from the car,

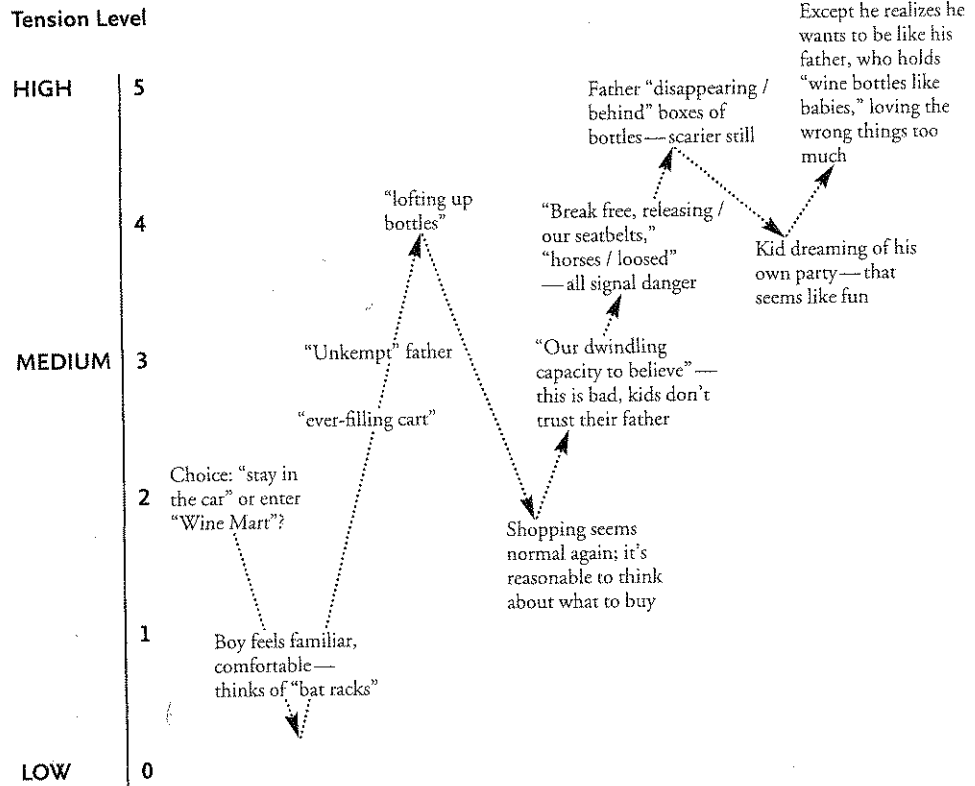
Tension Level



Map of tension in Sebastian from 1 to 5. The arrows rep indicates how much the ter

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When the kid loads or less drastic than the p 4 or a 5. Because the boy disappear, other readers Readers will react differ *changing* the intensity.



Map of tension in Sebastian Matthews's poem "Buying Wine" (p. 53). Tension level ranges from 1 to 5. The arrows represent the direction of the tension; the length of the arrows indicates how much the tension increases or decreases.

roaming. Unsupervised offspring of an alcoholic father, "like horses" for a moment, and anything could happen. Lots of tension here. Which drops back down when the boys are, sadly, drawn to the liquor store window, to peek in, glimpse "snippets of [the] father's profile." They want to be like him. They want to be with him. They want to be free. The tensions in the poem are further dialed up a notch in the line when he disappears "behind the tall cardboard stacks" as if he's being swallowed up by liquor, which, in fact, he is.

When the kid loads up his own cart in stanza twelve, do you see that as more or less drastic than the preceding stanza? Some readers will say it's just as tense: a 4 or a 5. Because the boy is hurt so deeply in the preceding stanza, seeing his dad disappear, other readers will see this stanza as less tense—a kid acting like a kid. Readers will react differently; what's important for you as the writer is to keep *changing* the intensity.

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When the speaker is dreaming of parties, some readers may feel this is the most tense part of the poem, because it's so easy to imagine the speaker going down a bad path. Others will believe that the final image, of the father holding "wine bottles like babies in his hands," creates the deepest emotional impact of the entire poem, as we see the father being more careful with the wine than with his real children.

Remember, if everything is at the same high level of excitement, your reader will grow just as bored as if there is no tension at all. Scientists and psychologists have shown definitively that the human mind adjusts quickly; it is designed to *adapt*. It's part of the human genius. We get used to things very, very quickly—loud background noise disappears, our surroundings homogenize, we don't notice changes in family members we see every day. Give us a bad situation, and it's human nature to adapt. Just when the room is getting too hot, turn down the thermostat; make the reader cool off. Then, just as the reader is cooling, crank the heat back up. That's the oppositional nature of this strategy: When things get bad, they have to get worse. When they get worse, they then have to get better.

As you practice, you will find more ways to intensify and manipulate the temperature. Here is a chart listing various elements of a piece of writing, presenting ways for adjusting the thermostat and modulating tension.

Adjusting the Temperature: Ways to Decrease and Increase Tension

Decreases Tension	Increases Tension
Agreement	Disagreement
Safety	Danger
Things are okay	Things are not okay
Generalization	Specific information; intimate details
One thing is going on	Two or three things happening at once
Linear, chronological exposition	Leaps
Moving ahead as expected	Reversals
Having all needs met, ease, simplicity	Wanting something badly, needing, yearning
Overcoming obstacles easily	Thwarted again and again
Solution = resolution	Solution to problem creates new problem
Explanation, telling	Mystery, withholding
Static character, doing nothing	Character in action

Character alone with thou

Speeches, interior dialogu

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Layers: Adding Dim

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PRACTICE

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Character alone with thoughts	Character in a triangle with two other characters
Speeches, interior dialogues	Crisp dialogue based on an argument
One technique used at length (all description, all dialogue, all interior thoughts . . .)	Variety of techniques (dialogue first, then description, then interior thoughts, then more dialogue . . .)
All long or all short sentences or lines	Short sentences or lines mixed up with longer ones
Seeing the big picture; long shots	Seeing things from <i>very</i> close-up

Layers: Adding Dimension

A stack of halved parsnips, looking like naked human limbs, maybe dead, in the fluorescent light of a refrigerator — not very interesting. Slightly creepy, perhaps, but what’s the point? You have a pile of scary vegetables. So what? The image is two-dimensional.

Add a young woman with cancer, who has to cook these parsnips for a wealthy family, where there may be adultery, deceit, neglect—a family with emotional cancers—and you’ve got something. Layers infuse your images with meaning, interest, and excitement. Jessica Shattuck’s “Bodies” is rich with layers.

PRACTICE

Read the short story “Bodies” by Jessica Shattuck on page 180, and as you read, see if you can notice the layers in the piece. When does one action or element of the story indicate or inform another action, character, or element?

Writers don’t always plan and control the layers in the poems, plays, memoirs, and stories they craft. Often, getting two tracks going—a needy kid watching *Lion King* in the other room, a babysitter with cancer dabbing the parsnips with butter—results in the images talking to each other, and creating more than the sum of their parts. When Shattuck describes Annie’s view of little Anthony, her charge, Annie sees the old man in the tiny five-year-old. “He is five years old, blond, and freckled, with close-set blue eyes. Something about his mouth and his stubby but prominent little nose hints already at the old man he will be—stubborn, soft-spoken, a little unforgiving.” Annie is aware of death, even in a little kid. The themes of the story—who talks, who forgives, what gets passed on—are embedded in the description of a five-year-old. Images are layered, and themes come out for the reader. The writer stays close-up—close enough to see

*Nothing is more odious than
music without hidden
meanings.*
— FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

the mouth, the exact nature of the nose, close enough to count the freckles on a cheek—and writes what she sees. As she works on her story, she becomes aware of patterns, images that keep coming up, calling for attention.

Bottom line: If you provide only one layer in your writing, readers will not find the tension in your piece, and will grow bored at best, and stop reading at worst. Girl goes to party, has fun, meets great guy, parties all night, has to dash to work late the next day—that's one layer. You need more layers in order to transform this series of events into creative writing.

Layering Images. Earlier, we noted the energy a writer gains by juxtaposing images, layering a series of “health” images over a series of “illness” images. Look at how Jay’s devotion to buffing his body contrasts with Annie’s illness. She imagines Jay doing handsprings; she herself pretends to be woozy when she isn’t. He gets more muscular; she gets sicker. “Bodies” is a good title for this story, which is about death, sex, passion, children—all the things that tie us irrevocably to the body.

One way to layer images in a poem or a narrative is to locate, in a draft already in progress, some oppositions or potential oppositions. Notice that when you are following images where they are alive—in a state of flux, moving, action-oriented, when things are changing—it will be easier to layer.

A moving image has traction—other images will stick to it. Layer the important stuff, not the background stuff. Layers not only create and increase tension, they tell the reader to pay attention—*this is important!* Layers make meaning.

PRACTICE

Find at least four examples of image layers in Marisa Silver’s story “What I Saw from Where I Stood” on page 167. List the layers and write a brief explanation.

Layering with Triangles. Triangles are a simple strategy for creating complex tensions. Think about triangles when looking for ways to layer your work to increase complexity. “Bodies” and “What I Saw from Where I Stood” both use triangles in order to make the work tension-filled, and interesting. Unlike a beginning painter, who might stick a tree in the middle of the canvas and call it good, a skilled artist employs many triangles, laid over each other. In the popular sitcom *Friends*, as in most film and television, triangles form the architecture of the series and create almost all the opportunities the writers have to use tension. Consider the two triangles that every episode uses: Joey-Chandler-Ross and

Monica-Phoebe-Rach coffee shop. Can you

PRACTICE

Nonfiction also relies on the triangles—as many Two Photographs, among angle in each.

Triangles form the angle. Annie is drawn by Annie—she cares for his children Cleo loves Jay, relies created by *complex* human triangles. Pieces with ship, aren’t going to h

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Creative writers a Basic tension is achieving desires that ar

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Monica-Phoebe-Rachel. The setting is also a triangle: two apartments and the coffee shop. Can you think of others?

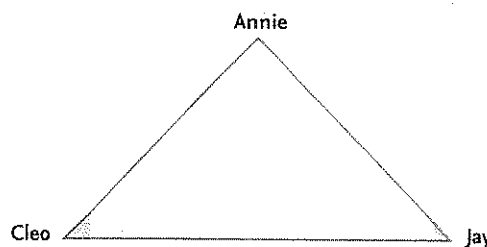
PRACTICE

Nonfiction also relies on the triangle strategy to keep the tension high and complex. List the triangles—as many as you can find—in the creative nonfiction piece, “My Mother in Two Photographs, among Other Things” on page 137, by Aleida Rodríguez. Locate a triangle in each.

Triangles form the basic tensions in “Bodies.” There’s a Cleo-Annie-Jay triangle. Annie is drawn to Jay. Cleo is married to Jay. Jay is attracted to and repelled by Annie—she scares him, her illness scares him, she lives in his house, cares for his children (more attentively than Cleo, the mother of his children). Cleo loves Jay, relies on Annie. This is a love triangle, but it’s also a triangle created by *complex* human relationships. Good creative writing relies on relationship triangles. Pieces with just one character, or two characters in a simple relationship, aren’t going to hold reader interest as readily as triangle pieces.

Shattuck is a very skilled writer. She uses triangles to create friction in her main characters, and amplifies those tensions with yet another triangle, the Michele-Cleo-Jay triangle. The Michele-Cleo-Jay triangle provides the subplot, the undercurrent, and this triangle operates as the catalyst for the story. Michele, Cleo’s niece, is in love with Jay, who maintains a secret relationship with the girl. Annie is stunned, as we are, by this secret triangle. Anthony is quite literally stuck in the middle of these adult relationships, which make a complex web around him. Good writers, just like visual artists, think in terms of threes, because groups of three add dimension, excitement, possibility, and interest. Threes always work.

Creative writers always avoid having one character alone with her thoughts. Basic tension is achieved when two people are in conflict with each other, presenting desires that are at odds. Better yet is creative writing that involves three



Tension triangle in Jessica Shattuck’s story, “Bodies.” Annie, Jay, and Cleo form a triangle. There will always be tension whenever these three are together at the same time.

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points of conflict, three forces. In a sophisticated or longer piece, writers layer one triangle over another in order to create dimensions. This is how tension works in creative writing.

With triangles, you create a space for the reader to form conclusions and insights. As a writer, you can use triangles to guide and deepen your images, to keep you on track. You have a triangle whenever three people are involved, each of whom represents a different agenda.

Recall the scene where Jay enters the kitchen (Cleo's abandoned space) to pour vitamins "fat as roaches into his palm." Notice the specificity—all the vitamins are named, described. Annie thinks about Cleo—so Cleo is present, although not physically. Notice the triangulation. Jay asks Annie to touch him. The images are intensified because they come at an intersection—sickness, the mad pursuit of perfect strength, milk/mother/Cleo/kitchen. Shattuck stays a long time, makes a big deal out of Annie's fingers on Jay's "warm wrist." Notice how much more time—five paragraphs, a dialogue conversation—is spent here. We stay on these images because they are dramatic, intense, uncomfortable—skin on skin. The kitchen scene's images link up with the roof scene later—when Annie gets her strength back, Shattuck doesn't have to explain it to us—Annie feels "her own blood finally—she is aware of its quick rhythm in the channels of her veins." And, "It is as if some door had opened inside her and she could hear everything."

Layering Dialogue and Action. Some beginning writers fill whole pages with direct dialogue, including long conversations that often don't create images in the reader's mind. No images: no tension. People yakking away mindlessly, or people stating the obvious in direct dialogue, is not good creative writing. Long speeches, monologues, and he said–she said predictable dialogues weaken good creative writing. Writer and teacher Robert Boswell explains that while we probably say 3,000 lines of dialogue out loud every day in our regular lives, perhaps twenty of those lines are worthy of including in a piece of literature. Like everything else in your poem, story, or play, dialogue has to have layers.

Here's an example of unlayered dialogue and action:

"I love you," he said. He handed her the flowers and the card.
 "Thank you," she said. She opened the card. "It's so beautiful!"
 "Thanks," he said, and leaned over to give her a kiss.
 "I love you," she said, and she kissed him back, with pleasure.
 "We're so great together," he said.
 She said, "I totally and utterly agree."

There's no reason to use dialogue to render the happy moment. The skilled writer covers this scene in two words, "They kissed," and moves on to the next

moment of tension. Say where the emotions are and action.

Other beginning writers use dialogue for description and reflection.

Notice the poems in this chapter. How often do people speak? How do you know they have a sense of exactly what is going on? How much dialogue is used? How does it affect the creative writing so it does what you want it to do?

Dialogue is always a close-up (someone is acting, someone is reacting). It's specific, it's intense, it's present, since it's a conversation.

PRACTICE

Read aloud just the dialogue on page 180. What do you notice about the actions that attend each line of dialogue? What is lost if we just hear the dialogue? Rank them in order of importance.

In order to sustain tension, dialogue never occurs outside of action. We interrupt, we slam the door, we scoot our chair back, we move our feet. Dialogue can't be a crucial part of *what is* going on.

Recall this scene from the kitchen; the image starts to move, the pulse, feels his wrist, and the pen in those five minutes is part of the soundtrack. Direct speech—sometimes you have someone look at you, someone look, move, try to sustain the angle, the length of time.

Dialogue needs to be witnessed or eavesdropped

moment of tension. Save dialogue for the places in your story or poem or essay where the emotions are mixed, and tease out the tension by layering the dialogue and action.

Other beginning writers avoid dialogue altogether, relying too heavily on description and reflection.

Notice the poems in this book that you have read so far that use dialogue. How often do people speak? How often is their speech summarized for us, so we have a sense of exactly what is spoken? In the fiction we have been studying, how much dialogue is used? When? How do you blend the dialogue into a piece of creative writing so it doesn't stick out, so it flows?

Dialogue is always going to attract a lot of attention from your reader. It's close-up (someone is actually talking, the author is far back, summarizing a conversation). It's specific, by definition, and usually at least two characters are present, since it's a conversation.

PRACTICE

Read aloud just the dialogue—nothing else—from the short story by Jessica Shattuck on page 180. What do you notice about the dialogue? Now, go back through and highlight the actions that attend each spoken bit. How do the actions create oppositions? Tension? What is lost if we just hear the spoken parts? Which dialogue-action bits have the most tension? Rank them in order of most tense to least tense.

In order to sustain tension in dialogue, it's useful to remember that dialogue never occurs outside of human action. When we speak, we use our full body, our face moves around, and our arms and gestures and habits punctuate our phrases. We interrupt, we slam the book on the table, we cross our arms, we roll our eyes, scoot our chair back, stroke the arm of our partner—all that is part of the conversation. Dialogue can't be separated from action, and so action is automatically a crucial part of *what is said*.

Recall this scene from the short story "Bodies." A man walks into the kitchen; the image starts. A woman pours a glass of milk, asks about his resting pulse, feels his wrist, and he talks to her, revealing his fear. Everything that happens in those five minutes, in that little micro-movie, is the image, and dialogue is part of the soundtrack. You want, as a writer, to vary the way you represent direct speech—sometimes you start with an action, then use a direct quote. Then, you have someone look away—no direct speech. Next time, you have one person look, move, try to speak, but they can't. Person B starts to talk, Person A interrupts. You want to vary the position of your camera eye, the closeness, the angle, the length of time spent on a conversation.

Dialogue needs to be written so that the reader feels somehow present as a witness or eavesdropper.

Work with dialogue and action as units, as a single thing with the two layers: the speech *and* the motions. Try to avoid disembodied dialogue, which loses energy fast in the past.

When writing dialogue, it's vital you use your training with the image. Often, new writers can sound like television programs, because so much of the dialogue we hear comes from that source. Really focus on what your characters truly say, even—especially—if it surprises you. Don't make it up. Take dictation. Let them surprise you. Never force characters in your work to say things *just for the sake of the piece you are writing*.

Avoid using clichés—overly familiar dialogue expressions, things people never *really* say. And, avoid not just spoken clichés but also action clichés, called emotional shorthand: raised eyebrows, grimaces, smiles, winks, pounding fists. Those are all shortcuts, cartoon gestures for real emotions, and the sign of lazy writing. Stay focused on the image, and write what you truly see there. Action-dialogue units need to have freshness, and truth in them. Stay very real, very focused.

Write exactly the tiny things you see in the conversation. Does she stick her pen in her mouth after each sentence? Shift her weight so that her pant leg hikes up? Shoot her fingers at you like she thinks she is so cool? Click her tongue and spit with each sentence? The tiny things that give an individual away—the things Carlo does when he talks that Joey *never* does—let those movements become part of the dialogue itself.

Practice listening to your friends and coworkers. What lines do they say that are worthy of putting in a piece of creative writing? “Hey, how you doing?” probably isn't going to make it. As mentioned before, *most* of what we say day-to-day isn't going to make the cut for a piece of writing. “Ya gotta beat the best to be the best.” That might make it. “Do you miss the fish?”

Now we're talking *tension*.

Façade

As you are well aware, people don't always say exactly what they mean. Much of the pleasure in reading dialogue is knowing more than a character or speaker knows about herself. Now that you have had practice layering dialogue and action to build tension, you want to *increase* the tension between what is said, thought, and done, between interior and exterior. There's a triangle here, an opportunity for opposition. In fact, in good creative writing, controlling tension in dialogue is not optional, it's required. And this technique, named by writer and teacher Jerome Stern, is called *façade*.

“Hey, how's it going,” your friend says, but we can tell by her tone, how she is hanging her shoulders and dragging her toe around, making a bored circle, that she doesn't care how we are doing at all. She just wants us to ask her how *she's* doing.

That gap—the “fals to the outside and what you” when we mean “I lo

PRACTICE

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Façade, layered on to to keep the tension levels

“I just can't do it,” Val just won't let me do it
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What do you notice ready—five weeks. Not patient. Not a very good against tension, not tow tells us everything we ne ances; it can't simply deli station in life.

That gap—the “false front” she is putting up—between what she presents to the outside and what is really going on inside her is a façade. We say “I hate you” when we mean “I love you.”

PRACTICE

Read Peter Morris's short play, “Pancakes,” on page 190. When do the characters say what they do not mean? How do you know this?

Dialogue in creative writing works best when it is used *not* to announce a character's thoughts or direct desires, *but to contradict them and create a gap, a false front*. Dialogue-action units let you juxtapose what's said with what's done; façade helps you broadcast the gap between what someone says and what they really think/feel/want.

In architecture, a façade is the front of a building. Think of a cheap building that has a fake brick front, but really is just a metal pole barn. There's a tension there. That building is pretending to be something it is not. Think of a house with an imposing façade—a grand entry, three stories of glass. But really, the house is just a three-bedroom tract house with a tiny kitchen, cheap carpet, and vinyl siding. A façade is a false front, and it's your most important dialogue tool. Without façade, most dialogue falls flat, and your readers will skip and skim.

When people talk to us in real life, they hint at things and focus on side issues, they beat around the bush. Usually, every conversation *that is interesting* has several levels. People have agendas.

Façade, layered on top of dialogue-action units, is the technique writers use to keep the tension levels in dialogue high.

“I just can't do it,” Valerie cried. “It's all those thirty-second notes. My fingers just won't let me do it!”

“Yes they will. You just have to trust them,” her instructor replied patiently.

“But my concert is in five weeks! I'm never going to be ready by then!”

“Well, with that attitude, you won't be. But I'll help you.”

“Okay,” Valerie said.

What do you notice about this passage? There's an awful lot of time to get ready—five weeks. Not very tense. There's a helpful teacher who is kind and patient. Not a very good opponent! But also notice the dialogue, how it works against tension, not toward it. Valerie explains exactly what her problem is and tells us everything we need to know. Dialogue has to reveal new emotional nuances; it can't simply deliver information to the reader about character, situation, station in life.

She wants to play faster. Her talent isn't up to the demands of the piece at this moment. She lodges two complaints, *I can't*, and, *I won't be ready*, and then she says, "Okay!" This is the opposite of what you want to do.

It's much more interesting for your reader if the character is revealing more than she thinks she is. Gaps and misinterpretations give the reader a place to worm into your writing.

Some of your dialogue can use the dialogue-action technique to keep tension modulated. But not all your dialogue can be a direct statement. You need some false fronts in order for your piece to be complex and tense.

Examine this dialogue exchange from Marisa Silver's "What I Saw from Where I Stood."

"We saw them," she said. "We know what they look like."

"They weren't killers. They were thieves. There's a difference, I guess," I said.

"No," she said, twisting her straight brown hair around her finger so tightly the tip turned white. "It doesn't make sense."

Dulcie needs things to be exact.

In the passage above, Dulcie's dialogue lines are interesting, because we have to pay attention to understand what they are about. She hides as much as she reveals when she talks. The reader is *drawn in*. These are not talking heads, making a point to serve the writer's goal. These are stressed-out people, in pain, trying to communicate. They say the wrong thing, or try to impress the cops or come off as serious and devoted, when really they are terrified inside.

Dulcie is real to the reader. She is saying things do make sense and they don't make sense, at the same time. She is experiencing a great deal of tension inside herself. We feel for her.

Read the dialogue further on:

"I should have noticed them tailing me," Dulcie said now. "How could I not notice a car that close?"

"Don't do that," I told her. "Don't think about what could have happened."

"I have to think about it," she said. "How can you not think about it? We were this close," she said, holding her fingers out like a gun and aiming at my chest.

What makes this dialogue passage tense? The use of *façade*. Dulcie has changed direction again: Earlier she said she noticed everything, now she is kicking herself for not noticing things right in front of her face. Usually, when people beat themselves up for something, there's something else in there bothering them too. What's on Dulcie's mind, besides the thieves? Then, her companion tells her not to worry about "what could have happened." But that isn't what she is worried

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PRACTICE

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1. Write a passage or boring. Or, bring ir boring passages alo things a writer can up-in-a-dictionary kills tension and rea

about. When people are tense, they misunderstand. They hear what they need to hear. Their own motives and concerns come out in the dialogue. He's trying to help. But is he barking up the wrong tree? What's his agenda in that line?

To write façade, know what your character wants, and have him speak to it a little sideways. Have him talk about one thing *by way of* talking about what really bothers him, a whole other thing. Then, Dulcie yells at him. In the passage above, Silver heats up the exchanges beat by beat—each exchange a little more tense, a little edgier, than the one before. She saves her most dramatic part of the dialogue, which is Dulcie communicating with her fingers, for last. By “We were this close,” do you think she means in more ways than one?

Usually, we reveal a lot more than we think we do when we talk to other people. When we are stressed and tense (those are the moments worthy of dramatizing through creative writing, remember!) our internal censors are less able to protect us. We say too much, or not enough. We don't mean to, but we reveal our deepest feelings and desires. That is probably the highest form of tension in literature.

This is a lot to practice.

What we are striving toward are dialogue-action units with internal tensions (what's said works against what the character is doing) working against the façade (what's said isn't what the character *really* means). That triangle is the essential heartbeat of tension.

In addition, the character's conversation and action lines work against the setting (you are close-up as you write all this), and her obstacles are *exactly* what she doesn't want. Set the thermostat, match your opponents, stay specific. Layer images, dialogue, and work toward false fronts—you'll be a tension-generating machine.

PRACTICE

Evaluate the changing levels of tension in Peter Morris's short play “Pancakes” (p. 191) by jotting a number in the margin to represent the tension level. When the level changes, write down a new number.

WRITING PROJECTS

1. Write a passage or poem utterly lacking in tension, interest, excitement: Be boring. Or, bring in the most boring piece of writing you can find. Read the boring passages aloud. Discuss: What are the most numbing, tension-killing things a writer can do? Long passages of description. Many difficult, look-it-up-in-a-dictionary word choices. What makes *boring* boring? Create a “what kills tension and reader interest” checklist. Avoid these pitfalls!