

Talking about suspense

Creating suspense in a work of fiction

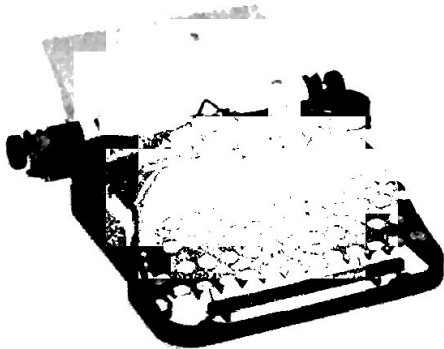
In order to capture and hold the reader's interest, the writer uses several devices to create/maintain suspense and to arouse our curiosity about the further development of the plot. Here are some devices to set the reader thinking or to get him/her interested in the action:

→ action/setting:

- include details which foreshadow developments or hint at the ending
- withhold bits of information
- let the story present unanswered questions
- describe a strange setting with a frightening atmosphere
- include surprising twists in the action
- describe scenes which emphasize the following: conflict, danger, threat, mystery, horror, supernatural or uncontrollable forces, illegal activities, etc.

→ characters:

- create round and complex characters whose fate and view of events the reader identifies with (e.g. through the limited perspective of a first-person or selective third-person narrator)
- create flat characters who personify 'evil'/danger



Creating suspense in a film

In addition to the narrative devices available to the writer, filmmakers as 'visual storytellers' may use certain cinematic techniques to build suspense.

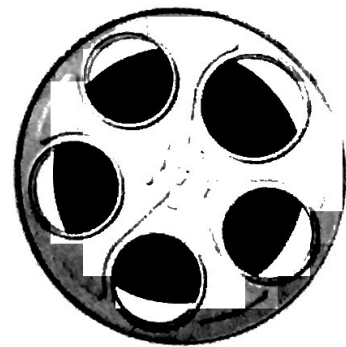
These techniques/devices may be related e.g. to

- sound effects
- music
- lighting
- 'visual' characterization through appearance/body language (plus the way of speaking)
- camera operations
- other effects like slow motion or hand-held camera

Usually, a number of devices are combined to create suspense in a scene.

collocational field

to build up/to create suspense
to keep s.o. in /to maintain suspense
to reduce/relieve/break suspense
constant/continual suspense
increasing/unbearable suspense



The following text is taken from the novelization of the 30-second opening scene of the film *The Sixth Sense*.

That night, as Cole and Lynn slept, Anna Crowe descended into the basement and flicked on a light. It was a dark, dismal place, empty but for a well-stocked wine rack. She had always meant to do something about the space. It had potential.

Anna shivered. The room was awfully cold for an autumn night – a damp, wintry cold that sent a chill down her spine.

She glanced over the wine bottles. There. A Beaujolais Villages, good vintage, Malcolm's favourite. As she raced back upstairs, she shut the door behind her.

- How does the writer create suspense?
 - Try to increase the suspense in the text by adding further adjectives, phrases or sentences without changing the action.
 - What could happen in the next scene?
 - On the basis of this text, try to 'visualize' the corresponding scene in the film.
- What cinematic devices might the director use to create suspense? View the scene for comparison.