

2016 WCCWN Study Book #2

How to Develop Story Tension by Amy Deardon

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Pages 53-63—Conclusion and Tip Sheet

Tip #1 — Make sure you include an external story line (Outer Story)

Three fundamental reasons your story may not have tension:

1. Narrative doesn't have Outer Story
2. Narrative's story arrow from the Outer Story is not clearly articulated
3. The Narrative's story arrow is not moving forward

Tip #2 — Make sure your Story Goal is specific and preferably something physical.

Tip #3 — Make your Story Stakes important to your hero so they become important to your reader. Story Stakes must be important to your hero.

Tip #4 — Your hero should want to accomplish something altruistic by achieving the Story Stakes.

altruistic adjective showing a disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others; unselfish: it was an entirely altruistic act. I question how altruistic his motives were.

Tip #5 — To maintain tension always keep at least one story element unknown or uncertain. Use internal and external Story Obstacles to keep the outcome of each action in doubt.

Tip #6 — Make sure every event that happens in your story puts your hero in a worse position than he was in before the event.

Tip #7 — A ticking clock is an amazingly effective way to add tension for actions both big and small. A time limit automatically ramps up tension.

Tip #8 — Portray your hero as competent and likeable (he is funny, friendly, and performs “pet the puppy” actions in which he serves others.

Tip #9 — A mirror character is someone similar to your hero, and can be used to demonstrate consequences of what may happen the antagonist attacks someone. Often the harm occurs to the mirror character because he made a wrong choice.

Tip #10 — Real danger pointed at your hero or, better yet, those close to him, ramps up story tension.

Tip #11 — On what is your hero relying – a person, information, a tool? Take it away.

Tip #12 — Another character with a conflicting goal naturally opposes your hero. An effective means to ramp emotional tension is to make an ally into this oppositional character.

Tip #13 — Add a positive reason why your hero might not want to pursue his scene goal. Give your hero options. Give him a selfish reason.

Tip #14 — Close your hero's options: If he chooses to do something, he will no longer be able to do an equally worthy alternative.

Tip #15 — Don't reveal all your cards for your story – generate suspense by letting your reader worry about unanswered questions.

Tip #16 — Reserve a bad surprise for your hero: something is worse than he thought it was.

Tip #17 — A bad surprise that stuns your hero is good for ramping up tension.

Tip #18 — Dialogue is not like real speech. Real speech is full of “umms,” circling ideas, and pointless phrases, (Hi, how are you? Good, and you?). Dialogue in fiction should contain the quality of verisimilitude — the appearance of reality – Verisimilitude – the appearance of being true or real. While remaining focused, efficient, and progressing through a specific (authorial) agenda.

Tip #19 — Dialogue can contain great irony and indirect tensions that glue your reader to your story.

Tip #20 — Deliberately shortening your prose in tense scenes adds an extra punch to your words.

Tip #21 — Make your chapters short so they read quicker. This technique lures your reader to find out “just one more thing” in your story before taking a break.

Tip #22 — Most of the Outer Story is a series of actions and reactions – a problem is solved and another takes its place. To push the story arrow forward, you need to constantly add new problems so your hero's quest to solve his story goal brings constant change and enlightenment. Make the Story Obstacles of different kinds: a need to escape a location for me, a logistical problem, and then an emotional confrontation. Remember that the solution of each Story Obstacle should leave your hero in a different, usually worse place than when he started.

Tip #23 — To prevent Meandering Story you need to make sure that all the actions in your story and especially your Outer Story, are building up and leading to something. Include all the steps you need, and eliminate the side trails.

Tip # 24 — The novel is made up of beads of Scene-Sequel-Scene-Sequel from beginning to end. The purpose of the scene is to clearly articulate the outer story action so that your reader can easily follow story events. The sequel serves to describe your characters' inner emotions and thus increase reader bonding with them and with your story outcome.

Tip # 25 — Each scene must have a purpose and must advance your story in some way. Avoid pointless events, excess verbiage, explanations, background and rabbit trails.

Tip # 26 — Each scene can only be told through one character's point of view (POV). All observations and emotions in one scene are from the perspective your POV character. You may switch POV characters for different scenes.

Tip # 27 — The Inner Story interprets emotions and “inner journeys” and can well tolerate indirect statements and ironic or unstated conclusions. In contrast, the Outer Story statements describing action in story events should be unambiguous since the Outer Story is the framework for everything else.

Tip # 28 — State your scene goal or scene question in one sentence, and use it to start your scene. This goal must be answered clearly with a “yes” or “no” by the end of the scene.

Tip # 29 — Scene Conflict takes up the major part of your scene. It features your hero striving for his Scene Goal while being held back by obstacles. Scene Obstacles can be both internal and external.

Tip # 30 — Scene Obstacles are usually answered sequentially, not interwoven. This makes writing the scene easier.

Tip # 31 — If you wish to increase tension, you may list some hero-known obstacles at the beginning of your scene before your hero starts sequentially, dealing with them.

Tip # 32 — Make sure you're not adding Obstacles simply to add Obstacles. They need to be real problems that take ingenuity to solve. This is what makes story fun.

Tip # 33 — You must answer your scene question, but in such a way that the answer leads to a new scene question. The “Yes, But” answer gives an affirmative, but also a negative consequences. The “No, and Furthermore” answer tells your reader your hero failed in his scene goal, and this failure has made his situation even worse.

Tip # 34 — Make sure the new scene goals are the results of your hero's actions or another cause you have previously set up. Bad things should not just fall from the sky.

SEQUEL – INNER STORY

Tip # 35 — The Sequel brings your reader emotionally closer to your characters by having her understand what they think and how they react to story events. Sequel can be one line or full-blown. These are easy to forget to include, so make sure you have them.

Tip # 36 — When your character breaks away after a Scene Disaster. The first thing he does is to emotionally react to the stunning bad news. These emotions aren't logical, simply felt. Some common ones are fear, anger, worry, or grief.

Tip # 37 — After your hero deals with emotions, he must determine his options. List them clearly, with pros and cons for each one. Try to introduce two or more bad options, with no good news.

Tip # 38 — After clearly reflecting on all his options, your hero should state his decision in one clear sentence. This statement goes either at the end of the sequel, and/or at the beginning of the next scene.

Tip #39 — After stating his decision, your hero figures out the first thing he needs to do to take action. This start-of-action may be at the very end of your sequel, or at the start of your next scene.

Tip #40 — By tasking five minutes before writing each scene or sequel to clearly articulate why you're including it and where it is headed, you will automatically generate a powerful forward story arrow that your reader will love.