

Kimmery Martin is an emergency medicine doctor-turned-novelist whose works of medical fiction have been praised by *The Harvard Crimson, Southern Living, The Charlotte Observer* and *The New York Times,* among others. A lifelong literary nerd, she promotes reading, interviews authors, and teaches writing seminars, speaking frequently at libraries, conferences, and bookstores around the United States. Kimmery completed her medical training at the University of Louisville School of Medicine and the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. She lives with her husband and three children in Charlotte, North Carolina. For the last two years, she’s been working on a novel about a group of female doctors on the frontlines during an emerging viral pandemic; it releases from Penguin Random House in Fall 2021. Her latest novel, *The Antidote for Everything*, is available now.

You can learn more about Kimmery on her website at [kimmerymartin.com](http://kimmerymartin.com) or on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/kimmerymartin/) or [Twitter](https://twitter.com/kimmerym). You can purchase her novels at [Park Road Books](https://www.parkroadbooks.com/search/author/%22Martin,%20Kimmery%22) or anywhere online books are sold—or for free, you can read her long, angsty posts on Facebook.

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In this presentation, we’ll discuss 10 specific strategies for building suspense in your novel, plus 5 things to avoid.

**No Matter The Genre, Suspense Is The Key To A Successful Novel**

Let’s examine the basic structure of a story: it consists of a character—the protagonist—who wants something, and an obstacle or adversary—the antagonist—who threatens to keep the hero from getting what she needs.

If you want the novel to work, you have to put the reader through some degree of hell. It’s paradoxical; IRL, people tend not to enjoy the sensation of constantly being on edge, but in fiction, it’s what keeps them turning the page.

**Tension Generates Suspense**

The word tension comes from the Latin verb *tendere*: ‘stretch.’ It’s the state of being stretched tight, which we’ve parlayed into meaning a mental or emotional strain. In fiction, suspense—the desire to know what happens next—comes from the uncertainty and anxiety generated by tension.

**So … How Do We Create Tension?**

* *Tension Comes From Making Promises* (and promises must be kept).

At first thought, it would seem that tension comes from action, or violence, or a series of big things happening. If someone charges into a hospital and holds a brilliant ER doctor hostage, it’s not the action itself that keeps us reading, it’s the promise that there will be consequences for everyone involved.

We’ve made a vow to the reader: the question of what happens to the doctor held at gunpoint will be answered. So to create tension, you need to define unmet desires in the characters and you need to answer every single one of them.

* *Every Novel Must Have At Least One Big Question To Answer*

Establish your hero’s goal clearly and early in the novel. The reader must know what the stakes are and who is trying to prevent the protagonist from success.

**Ten Specific Strategies To Increase Suspense and Tension**

1. **Up The Stakes**

Not only is the crazed fentanyl addict threatening to kill the ER doc, but he’ll only let her go if she exchanges places with her best friend. If she doesn’t, he’ll blow up the entire building. Analyze the tensest scenes to see how you can make them worse: what is the most agonizing moral choice the protagonist must make?

1. **Add Complications and Obstacles**

Now is the time for Murphy’s Law. What could possibly make this situation worse?

1. **Take It Down A Notch**

Whoa there, cowgirl. Every single scene cannot escalate. Your reader needs time to process all this mayhem, and you need to drag out the suspense, so it’s okay to juxtapose tense scenes with calmer moments.

**4. Utilize Subplots**

Incorporate smaller plot lines with their own mini-dramas and questions to answer. This keeps your reader engaged while waiting for the big payoff.

**5. Use Plot Twists To Your Advantage**

Midway through, it is revealed the doctor knows her attacker: it’s a former friend who came to her earlier with a pressing medical problem, but vanished before receiving his diagnosis.

**6. Incorporate Tension On Both A Macro and Micro Level**

Structure your paragraphs and even sentences to keep a reader engaged. The doctor knows her patient’s diagnosis is a death sentence, but she doesn’t reveal that in the first few words when they finally discuss it; instead she draws it out, talking about the work-up and the symptoms first.

Micro-tension also comes into play when there is disagreement between any two characters, concealed emotion or overt displays of uncomfortable emotion, power struggles, ego clashes, or unrealized small goals.

Pay attention to words you can cut and ways to tighten your sentences.

**7. Foreshadowing**

Incorporate omens, body language, scene descriptions, and behavior as tone. You can also use symbolic language to indicate something is going to happen or allow the characters and/or narrator to overtly tell the reader what is coming.

**8. Structure The Ending Of Scenes and Chapters To Maximize Anticipation**

End on a cliffhanger, or a big plot twist, or a sudden reversal of expectations.

**9. Analyze Scenes For Tension Inducing Details**

Can you change the setting to a more ominous or unpredictable place? What about the weather? Does the protagonist have a phobia? Did something bad happen in this spot before? What is the greater backdrop? War? A Cultural Shift? Religious Persecution?

**10. Just When everything Seems Fine…**

Give your hero a false sense of security and then blow it up. Have her come to the wrong conclusion or fall into a trap. (She thinks the hostage-taker is unconscious from the Xanax she crushed into his drink, but unbeknownst to her, he switched their cups…)

**But I’m Not Writing A Thriller…**

You don’t need hostages, car crashes, and explosions tocreate tension. Exploit the expectations of your genre to elicit apprehension in the reader. In a love story, the reader wants to know if the love interest and the protagonist wind up together; in a crime novel they want to know if the villain gets away with it. The inner conflicts of the characters figure prominently in literary fiction and women’s fiction.

This is a good time to reiterate: action and violence are not what drives tension. Tension comes from the promise you make to the reader that something is going to happen or something important is going to be revealed.

**Five Big** **Tension Killers**

**1.** **Backstory:** You rarely need to start a book with backstory; layer this in later, after you’ve established the here-and-now.

**2. Too Much Information**

This includes unnecessary filler, dialogue, and transitioning; as well as tipping your hand too much or too soon.

**3. Scenes That Don’t Drive The Plot**

If a scene isn’t moving the story forward, is it needed?

**4. Forgetting To Tie Up Loose Ends**

This is where editors and beta readers come in handy because they will spot your plot holes and dangling threads. I also keep a running list of things to remember to wrap up. Nothing wrecks suspense like finishing a book and realizing you never found out if the annoying neighbor got her comeuppance or if they found the lost dog.

**5. Lack Of Clear-Cut Goals**

Early in the novel, the reader must become aware of these four things:

1. What the hero wants
2. Why she wants it
3. What is preventing her from her goal
4. What the consequences will be if she doesn’t achieve it

If the reader can’t identify these things, there’s no suspense because they don’t know what is at stake. Proofread your early chapters to see exactly when and how you present these things.

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As a wholly unrelated bonus—and to lighten things up—I’ve included some general tips for a flawless first draft of your manuscript ;)

Happy writing!

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Kimmery’s Top Twelve Writing Tips

Let’s be honest: I am not a trained writer. I don’t have an MFA or a background in journalism or even an English major. So it might amaze you that my first novel [The Queen of Hearts](http://www.kimmerymartin.com/)was in flawless form when I finished its first draft. Revision? Ha! I had to look up the meaning of the word. I’m not saying I managed to hit every one of the guidelines listed below, y’all, but I came darn close. It takes a special kind of literary genius to accomplish so much right out of the gate, but I’m not selfish. To commemorate my foray into the novel-writing world, I have compiled a list of tips—based on my initial manuscript— for anyone out there who might be struggling with their own first draft. You’re welcome.

**1. Use Lots of Adverbs**

Adverbs are how you describe things. Use them liberally and festively: people love that. Just ask Stephen King or Elmore Leonard.

**2. Do Lots of Telling**

This helps the reader know what’s going on. Don’t assume they’ll figure it out from the action.

**3. Use Curse Words for Emphasis**

Here’s a famous example from Ernest Hemingway: “The first draft of everything is shit.” The more cursing you have, the more badass you sound, especially if you write cozy mysteries or Christian fiction.

**4. Jargon is Important**

This is key if you have a business-y type protagonist: “Don’t bother me while I’m actioning my deliverables, Jane. Management has instructed me to pivot off our legacy brand message to get HIPPO buy-in on this layout.” See how realistic you sound?

**5. Exclamation Points are Exciting**

Yes, they are!!!

**6. Use Dialogue to Convey Essential Information**

“My impressive job as an Orthopedic Surgeon allows me plenty of opportunity to rendezvous with my slinky mistress Jezebel, the 5’ 9” OR nurse.”

**7. Suddenly, All Hell Broke Loose**

If you have a scene that isn’t going anywhere, just insert this sentence.

**8. Make Sure Every Sentence Verb**

See what happened there? A good editor might catch things like this in a later draft but you can’t count on it.

**9. Use Similes Creatively and Copiously**

Her hair was dark like the octagonal black squares of a new soccer ball and her eyes were as cerulean as a crayon.

**10. Everybody Loves a Good Prologue**

Throw in a prologue (or two) to whet your readers’ appetite. Bonus points if you open with a dream sequence, someone who just woke up, or a description of the weather.

**11. The Passive Voice Was Better Than The Aggressive Voice**

I know from reading my kids’ homework essays that if you complain too much about the passive voice it causes the writer to throw their iPad at you.

**12. And Finally, The Oxford Comma**

If, You, Want, To, Be, A, Writer, You, Must, Share, Your, Important, Opinions, On, The, Oxford, Comma, With, Everyone

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