THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSPENSE IN MYSTERY-WRITING:

HOW WRITERS CAN CREATE AND SUSTAIN IT —

AND WHY THEY MUST

by

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Introduction

How do authors of mysteries keep their readers turning pages? By netting them in a web of Suspense, using as many types and categories of withholding and surprise as possible. If a story's interesting and well-told, readers will be curious to know what comes next in the narrative, and how the plot will be resolved. While readers' curiosity certainly contributes to the creation of the Suspense they experience, management of their curiosity is not totally within the author's control. But what authors *do* have complete control over are the devices for generating Suspense that they employ in weaving their web.

Before discussing the devices which produce different categories of Suspense (some of them peculiar to the mystery genre), we need a general definition: ***In a literary context*, Suspense is a state of mind created when readers (a) *do not know* what's coming next in the narrative or what the outcome of a conflict or sequence of events will be, but (b) *want to know*, and (c) *care about what happens*.** The last two are crucial: if readers *don't* want to know what happens, or *don't* care about events and outcomes, they probably won't finish the book.

To create a web of suspense, authors must keep their readers continuously "guessing" as to the next developmental incident and the shape of ultimate outcomes. **Predictability is the great enemy of Suspense.** Readers should not be allowed to know with certainty what lies ahead, and authors should sprinkle the path with surprises.

Knowing that surprises will occur provides readers with pleasurable anticipation and keeps them wondering what they will find around the next bend. This "looking ahead"—informed by (b) and (c) above—urges readers onward, anticipating (1) the probability of being frequently surprised and (2) learning whether their expectations regarding outcomes are to be fulfilled or reversed.

Authors know that anticipation is powerfully conducive of both hope and dread. Once engaged, readers are compelled to read on to discover whether their hopes are vindicated or their dreads justified. But engagement can occur only if the author has successfully made readers *want to know* and truly *care about* what happens.

Broadly speaking, it's Suspense that keeps readers moving forward through a story. If predictability, the great enemy of Suspense, once manages to come within the gates, readers' interest will be undermined; indifference and boredom will likely ensue. To hold their readers, authors must, at all costs, avoid boring them.

It strikes me that Suspense is like the head of steam that drives a train or turns the screws that propel an ocean liner on its course. The author's job is to maintain the pressure so that forward movement never flags. There are many ways that authors can do this, many devices and maneuvers that will bind readers fast and keep them turning pages. All these tactics serve the double strategy of making readers *want to know* what happens, and *care about* what happens. Since in their diversity these discrete tactics result in various *kinds* of Suspense, **it might be wise to conceive 'Suspense' in the plural. Successful authors will empower all of these "suspenses"—whatever their source and causative agency—to work together as a whole to net readers in a web from which they can't escape.** Let's examine some of these tactics and see where they take us.

STRUCTURAL DEVICES

The "inverted" detective story: reader as spectator

Pioneered in the early 20th century by R. Austin Freeman, the "inverted detective story" employs a narrative structure where, early on, readers witness the crime and know who the murderer is. What the reader doesn't know is whether, and by what means, the killer will be caught. **Suspense arises from reading on to discover these things, and from watching the detective reconstruct the crime, gather evidence, and apprehend the perpetrator.** (The inverted detective story has been represented in recent years by the popular *Columbo* TV series, with Peter Falk as the detective.) Foreknowledge of the murderer's identity tends to put readers into the role of spectators rather than that of being detectives in their own right working to unravel the mystery alongside the protagonists or in competition with them. (Readers who like playing detective, or solving puzzles, or matching wits with the protagonist and/or the author, may not be as gripped by the inverted detective story as they would be by a more conventional whodunit. Those who enjoy watching a problem-solving protagonist at work, or observing the psychological unraveling of a criminal ego, may greatly enjoy the inverted detective story.)

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The caper: reader as observer/"participant"

In the subclass of crime novel called "the caper", the plot entails an illegal undertaking (usually a theft of money, jewels, or rare artifacts—or feasibly

an assassination or act of sabotage) organized and planned by a group of conspirators each of whom has a specialized role to play in the enterprise. By the author's focusing on the personalities of the conspirators and largely adopting their point of view, the criminals become the story's collective protagonist. The reader is thereby led to identify with them and take an interest in the outcome of their enterprise. To that extent, the reader is not only an observer of the action as it develops, but also a vicarious "participant" in the scheme. **Suspense arises from readers' (a) not knowing whether the undertaking will succeed, and (b) (through having "participated" in the planning of its stages) being aware, in a general sense, of what might go wrong. As the action unfolds, readers' suspense is intensified as complications aggregate—setbacks, unforeseen accidents, miscues, stumbling blocks, and interpersonal squabbles—that threaten to disrupt the caper or defeat it altogether.** (This tendency of well-laid plans to go astray has frequently led caper novelists to invest their stories with irony and humor. But even farce can be productive of Suspense. On the other hand, some capers are deadly serious; and one type of suspense *these* generate is anticipatory dread.)

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Cliffhangers

A "cliffhanger" is a break or pause at a critical juncture in narrative flow which leaves unresolved a crisis in action or plot development that cries for resolution. **It creates Suspense for engaged readers by temporarily withholding knowledge regarding the crisis's outcome which they desperately want to have.** When a cliffhanger occurs, it's usually at the end of a chapter or installment. The use of cliffhangers was common in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when popular magazines published long novels in serial installments. Cliffhangers were a device to ensure that readers, to learn what happened, would eagerly anticipate (and purchase) the magazine's next issue.

Nowadays many people hold cliffhangers in low esteem as a cheap and "easy" way to generate suspense. In books, where chapters are contiguous, and resolutions follow fairly quickly on the heels of crises, the use of cliffhangers is transparently obvious as an attempt to create suspense, and can, if badly handled, smack of sensationalism. As a tactic, the cliffhanger's value is further diminished when it's used too frequently in a work, or when readers find the eagerly-awaited resolution to be a disappointing letdown that trivializes the crisis which aroused their concern. It does authors no good for readers to feel that their trust, good will, and emotional investment have been manipulated through the use of a device which is seen to be little more than a cheap trick, or, worse, a type of cheating.

That said, it's nonetheless true that cliffhangers can and do create Suspense. If well-managed and used judiciously, they have a legitimate place in the author's inventory of devices for ensnaring readers. And there might well be particular occasions where they would be especially effective. But, all in all, cliffhangers should be used sparingly.

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Solution of problem or puzzle (Can it be done? It better be!)

By definition, mystery stories embody and dramatize the solving of puzzles: discovering truth in obscure and murky situations, ascertaining the motives behind unethical and criminal acts, reconstructing time-lines and sequences of events, establishing accountability and determining guilt, forecasting and preventing future harm, interpreting clues to find a missing "treasure".

These activities produce many types of Suspense, whether the puzzle-solvers are police professionals, amateur sleuths, insurance investigators, or private eyes. Detectives, like readers, are motivated by "*not* knowing, but *wanting* to know, and *caring about* what it is they learn". How they go about solving their puzzles, and whatever types of suspense they experience in pursuing that activity, echo and parallel the types of Suspense readers feel who identify with them and join their quest. It follows that, whatever else they are, mystery stories—as vehicles for the solution of puzzles—are inherently and *quintessentially* suspenseful.

However, for this present section, I wish to pull back from the global suspensefulness of the mystery story and focus on the type of Suspense that arises from requiring detectives to solve a *specific* problem or puzzle *within the narrative.*

These internal problems and puzzles may be highly diverse. In a police procedural, for example, the detectives may be working against time to figure out the MO and personality traits of a serial killer, and clues implicit in the patterning of the murders, in order to save further lives. Or, before the timers detonate them, finding where on the airplane or in the convention hall the bombs have been planted. **Working against a deadline or playing "beat the clock" with dire consequences as the price of failure can greatly intensify the suspense that readers feel.**

The entire story frequently revolves around solving the puzzle. For example, breaking a code or cipher in espionage thrillers, where lives are at stake, or a battle can be won by monitoring the Enemy's internal communications without their knowing. In *The Da Vinci Code* much of the action depends on the decipherment and interpretation of arcane symbols and the messages they imply. In "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," Sherlock Holmes cracks a pictographic cipher and learns that a woman's life is in danger, and then

uses the cipher himself to trap her husband's killer; in "The Musgrave Ritual" he processes verbal clues in the form of a riddle to solve a disappearance and find a treasure. Other examples can readily be found in classical and contemporary mysteries.

In this category, the Suspense arises from the reader's not knowing whether the detective (1) will be able to solve the problem/puzzle, and (2) if so, whether the solution will lead to beneficial consequences, and/or will be accomplished in time to prevent some anticipated catastrophe. (In some stories, part of the suspense in solving a problem or cracking a code may arise from a competition, or race, between the protagonist detective(s) and an antagonist or rival group, with something of value to be gained as the prize for winning.) **Success in solving the puzzle must result in a significant payoff (saving lives, preserving a cultural or historical artifact, finding a treasure, etc.) both to maximize the creation of Suspense in "getting there", and to justify the degree of Suspense which the reader has experienced.**

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Merriam-Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* (1973) defines 'suspense' as "**2 a**: a mental uncertainty: ANXIETY **b**: pleasant excitement as to a decision or outcome <a novel of ~>." To my mind, this definition is neither specific nor detailed enough to provide much insight into what readers experience in reading mysteries, or much help to authors in deciding how best they can keep their readers turning pages.

Therefore, earlier I presented the following general definition of 'Suspense' as, hopefully, more suggestive and useful to writers as they ply their craft: "*In a literary context*, Suspense is a state of mind created when readers (a) *do not know* what's coming next in the narrative or what the outcome of a conflict or sequence of events will be, but (b) *want to know*, and (c) *care about what happens*.

Since authors use various tactical narrative devices to induce the "state of mind" defined by (a-c) above, and since these devices create many *different types*, or *categories*, of suspense, I suggested that it would be useful to conceive 'Suspense' as a *plural*. These diverse categories feed into and undergird the inherent baseline Suspense that readers experience in reading a mystery: and, in so doing, they produce a state of mind constantly assaulted, tweaked, and played upon by combinations of stressors which delay, impede, misdirect, and complexify readers' attempts to satisfy their need to know. Suspense is intensified by readers' encounters with deceitful people and shocking events, threats and perils, unforeseen twists in storyline, dark forebodings, frightening images, physical dangers, the expectation of surprise, etc., etc. These the author plans and choreographs to maximize readers' pleasure and to keep them turning pages.

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Continuing to unpack the toolbox — Suspense is generated by:

Danger to be faced or escaped from

Danger (however manifested, and whether anticipated, immediately threatened, or actually in process) produces anxiety and requires some sort of defensive response (evasion, forestalling, flight, counter-threat/-strike, escape). **Suspense arises (1) from readers' not knowing whether, or how, the protagonist will successfully withstand or neutralize or escape from the danger, (2) from (perhaps) not knowing the source of the danger or the shape it will take, or (3) from knowing full well what the nature of the danger is, and what its consequences will be. Suspense also can arise from readers' identifying with protagonists as they face additional and subsidiary dangers in battling to survive or in making their escape.** Most thrillers, whether focused on action, psychology, or the supernatural, rely on actual, threatened, or anticipated dangers to propel their narratives.

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Being confronted, stalked, or endangered by an Unknown Menace

A subclass of the preceding is danger emanating from an Unknown Menace. **Suspense of high intensity can be generated by readers' identifying with protagonists who (1) are aware of their being threatened with danger, or are actually experiencing it, but (2) do not know *why* they are. And, feasibly, (3) do not know *who* or *what* is behind it.** A shadowy "faceless" menace (perhaps diffuse, or indiscriminate in its victims) is inherently frightening, because one does not know what the extent or parameters of the danger might be, what forms it will take in manifesting itself, or even what is motivating it. The source might be a solitary anonymous stalker, a criminal conspiracy (drug cartel, combine of multinational corporations, rogue government agency, terrorists, etc.), an individual or group threatened by the protagonist's activities, or—in the novel of paranormal terror—a malevolent supernatural force (e.g., Anson's *The Amityville Horror*, Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror", Blackwood's "The Wendigo", Dorothy McArdle's *The Uninvited*, etc.) (I am not including in this discussion the suspense generated by stories of disaster we're all familiar with: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, burning skyscrapers, epidemics, mountain climbing accidents, and sinking ocean liners. Somebody else can explore that topic.)

Readers tend to identify with protagonists in peril (and thus share with them whatever Suspense *they* experience). This is a boon to story-tellers. To increase readers' Suspense, authors simply have to augment and intensify the dangers faced by the protagonists and the anxiety *they* feel. However,

the relative ease of revving things up presents a danger to *authors themselves*. Simply stated, they may fail to make the conclusion fulfill the promise of the buildup. They paint themselves into a corner, their imagination peters out, they find that their initial premise (window dressing aside) is thin and lame.

After they have caused readers to experience keen anxiety and to eagerly anticipate a resolution commensurate with their emotional investment, authors have an obligation to provide a worthy outcome. When I read *The Da Vinci Code*, I thought it started well. But somewhere around the middle of the book I began to sense signs of strain, a falling off of novelty and imaginative vigor, a kind of repetition, growing predictability. I began to lose interest, fearing the worst. It came, with an ending so weak I *almost* felt that I had wasted my time. It's not the only suspenseful book I've read that I felt let me down at the end. I'll bet you've read some, too.

But authors who hope to satisfy their readers and gain a following cannot afford to let people down. When people pick up a book to read, they are committing part of their *life-time* to the effort. Authors should remember this and make sure the reader's experience is worth that very precious time.

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Interaction of characters (competition, misunderstanding, hostility, love relation, distrust, deceit, betrayal)

Characters are the lifeblood of mystery fiction. Without them, there would *be* no mystery demanding solution; it's human consciousness, after all, that interprets a set of circumstances and events as constituting a mystery.

In large measure, readers read to associate with the characters—enjoying their diverse personalities, observing them responding to events, identifying with them, fearing for them, urging them on, second-guessing them, judging them, wishing them well. And of course authors enjoy the characters too: they're fun to create, launch into play, and orchestrate in their interactions. **Suspense as I've defined it arises from characters' interaction with events, or their interactions with each other.** I'll discuss the former in the next section. Here I want to discuss Suspense that arises from "interpersonal" engagements.

Many types of human interaction are capable of generating Suspense. People disagree, compete, fall in love, harbor bigotry and prejudice, mistrust others' motives, lie, cheat, betray, nurse grudges, seek revenge, pass judgments, and enter into seductions. The *particular* interactions that might produce Suspense for the reader are as infinite as the individual characters that authors create to people their stories.

The following types of interactions come to mind by way of illustration: any conflict with an uncertain outcome; any misunderstanding needing to be resolved; a proposal of marriage; providing counsel or advice to a close-minded, headstrong person (who might be in denial); convincing an aged but stubborn parent to give up the car keys; disagreements regarding the significance of something; a person's making a report and telling a truth, but not being taken seriously, nor believed; betrayal of a trusting friend for personal advantage; hiding a shameful secret from someone who has a need or right to know; mistrusting someone (insurance salesman, lawyer, nursing home director, cop, judge, or mortician) who promises something of benefit; a child's providing emotional support to a grandparent at a time of crisis; spouse's deceiving spouse to hide an adulterous affair, etc. And of course the necessary baseline conflict between the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) is a given. **For readers, Suspense arises from not knowing the outcome of the particular interactions the fictional characters engage in, but** *wanting* **to know, and reading on to see what happens.** (Will she say yes, or reject him? will Aged Parent give up control of the keys? will "Cassandra", who knows the truth, ever be believed? will Millicent find out that Edward is cheating on her?)

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Characters' engagements with action or event (the chase, the pursuit, a coming assassination, will they find the child in time? Etc.)

Characters' interactions with events are a common source of Suspense for readers. These interactions include characters' responses to events that have already happened or are currently in process, as well as those yet to come that they're anticipating or planning for. Some stories are chockablock with stressful events that hurl the protagonist from crisis to crisis so fast there's no breathing space or oasis of calm. In a long work, such a rapid and unremitting pace can fatigue the reader; and by the narrative's always being in a state of crisis, *particular* crises lose their force, emotional impact, and what special meaning they might've had.

The manufacturing of crises whose outcomes aren't immediately certain is, I think, a relatively easy way to create Suspense: simply put the hero in harm's way, push the button, and let the chips scatter as they must. Authors who wish to write thrillers (and even lazy authors) can fabricate a reasonably propulsive tale that satisfies readers who enjoy, and are content with, the titillation of constant Action. **But this ease of using crisis to generate Suspense should be a warning to authors who aspire to write fiction of a different sort than action-thrillers.**

And truly, "event" encompasses much more than crisis. It can be something as small as opening a door, or cleaning a wound, winning a bet, or sending an e-mail. On the other hand, it can be a longterm process, like settling a

labor strike, or writing a novel, planting a garden, or planning a heist. **It's by *identifying* with characters as they interact with events that have significant but uncertain consequences, and thereby vicariously *sharing* in this interaction, that readers themselves experience Suspense.**

Some actions and events are inherently more suspenseful than others. A standard device for generating suspense is The Chase. Though they are a cliché, chases *do* quicken the reader's pulse; it's their effectiveness at doing so that's *made* them a cliché. And to be sure, they contribute legitimate suspense to a story (unless there are too many of them, in which case they become repetitious and a drag). For all his story-telling skills, the late Robert Ludlum seems to have been much given to The Chase: in the books of his I've read (and I stopped after six) it seemed that his protagonists were always on the run. **A final word regarding The Chase: for the reader, *pursuit* can be as suspenseful as flight**.

Suspense is created when characters are forced to interact with events that present them with overwhelming odds, that hinder them with apparently insurmountable obstacles, that confront them with catastrophic situations which can be defused only by luck, pluck, cleverness, and speed. (Can the protagonist forestall the scheduled assassination and thus prevent a war? find and deactivate the ticking bomb in the next four minutes? discover where the kidnapped girl's been hidden and rescue her before she goes into diabetic coma? Etc.)

Again, these devices frequently embody cliché: just consider how many novels, short stories, stage plays, radio dramas, films, and crime & detective TV series have used them. But skillful writers are able to avoid readers' seeing them as clichés by employing them in fresh and surprising ways—so effectively that readers don't consciously recognize them as something they've seen before. *And they haven't*:—because in the hands of skillful mystery writers the devices come to have a new life in unique surroundings, freshly minted in a space not visited before, a space inhabited by original, interesting characters embarked on what for them is an uncharted journey. Once enmeshed in the author's well-woven web of suspense, readers have little choice but to join in and continue the journey with these characters, responding to events and circumstances as they come.

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A series of connected events whose sequential unfolding produces consequences (the domino effect) that can be *partially* foreseen
A useful way of generating suspense is for the author to plan a logical series of connected events which, when set in motion, go down sequentially like dominoes to produce consequences which readers can *partially* foresee. (Each of these consequences, in turn, becomes a *new* event with its own

potentials for generating suspense.)

When this device is used, readers' Suspense arises from a (partial) understanding of the projected series of events and the fact that the occurrence of one will trigger the occurrence of the next, and so on. To the extent that readers can foresee the sequence, they feel excitement and suspenseful anticipation based in either hopefulness or dread. (Frequently the "caper novel" exemplifies the use of this device.)

I stress that the reader's foreknowledge must be only *partial*, because, as I said in the Introduction, "Predictability is the great enemy of Suspense. Readers should not be allowed to know with certainty what lies ahead, and authors should sprinkle the path with surprises." **While generating Suspense through partial foreknowledge and anticipation, authors must *always* allow for an element of surprise and the unexpected. Knowing (from experience) that the author they're reading is inclined to spring surprises also intensifies the readers' Suspense.**

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Suspense generated by:

Foreshadowing (perhaps in dialogue): giving the reader something to anticipate

Foreshadowing occurs when authors insert into the text hints and intimations of events or situations that ostensibly will come later in the narrative. Foreshadowing, a highly effective means of generating Suspense, is to be distinguished from *foretelling*, and from *planning* future actions, as in a "caper novel".

Foreshadowings presage, prefigure, or raise the possibility of future events. Foreshadowing may take many different forms—a passing remark, a puzzling artifact discovered in an old desk, an eccentric person's observed habits, the arrival in a small town of a notorious person just released from prison, a cluster of disturbing physical symptoms that may presage a serious illness, a casual discussion regarding the nature of avalanches, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other natural disasters (in environments where these things could happen).

There's a maxim from theatrical production that's useful here: "If a gun is introduced to the audience in the first act, it had better be used in the third." (I suppose Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* is one of the best examples of this principle in action.) Conversely, if someone is shot in Act 3, it's helpful for the audience to have been made aware in Act 1 of the gun's presence onstage. (And of course, if much is made of the gun in Act 1, the audience's having to

wait to see how it will ultimately be used will contribute to *their* Suspense).

The playwright's revelation of the gun in Act 1 is a "plant" (a device that I would contrast with foreshadowing). Though the gun's appearance in Act 1 is a preparation for its later use, its "planting" does not per se specify *how* it might be used in Act 3—just that it will have *some* role to play. On the other hand, I'd suggest that, while sometimes vague in precisely what they portend for later narrative incidents, *foreshadowings* are generally less open-ended than plants because they tend to point forward *in specific directions*, toward *particular* situations and events*.*

Foreshadowings can have several functions. By hinting at potential future events, (1) they prepare the way and generate suspense by whetting the reader's anticipation. By occurring in the text prior to the events and situations they presage, (2) they lay a foundation that lends credibility to the events and situations when they *do* occur. And (3) if they take place in dialogue, they may possibly reveal the speakers' anticipations, opinions, hopes and fears regarding the matters presaged—if they do, those revelations will have the collateral benefit of contributing greater depth to the speakers' characterizations.

Available to authors writing in the first person point of view and in the third-person omniscient, there's a heavy-handed version of *assertive* intimation which I call **"there-you-have-it" foreshadowing**. Like the cliffhanger, it is frequently seen as a blatant attempt to generate suspense: "I got home late and went straight to sleep. When the alarm woke me at six, I got dressed and went to the office. I should have stayed in bed." Or, "After some soul-searching, she did XYZ. It would prove to be a mistake." Or, "He decided not to send the gift. Later he wished that he had." Open-ended, for sure, and inherently vague. Of note: implied *negative* consequences seem to be more capable of generating suspense than implied positive consequences: "Thelma wondered if she should divorce George or kill him. She finally decided to kill him—the best decision she could have made." These **"there-you-have-it" foreshadowings** leap off the page. If used often in a single work, they come to be extremely obnoxious. If they're to be used at all, it should be only rarely, when they are the best way of achieving some sought-after special effect; and, possibly, with authors' tongue-in-cheek awareness that their presence can evoke genre-based self-referential humor.

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The growth of misunderstanding or the emergence of crucial revelations within dialogue.

In writing fiction, *dialogue* is one of the author's most powerful tools for advancing the story. What characters *say* can look backward to what's

already happened, point forward to what might happen in the future, and engage immediately with the ongoing present. And more: **dialogue can establish story-line continuity; make possible evaluative and critical assessments of past events; remind readers of what they should remember; foreshadow events to come, increasing readers' anticipation; highlight those things that speakers regard as important; deepen the speakers' characterizations by showing how they say things, what they reveal, what they withhold, and if they dissemble (their habits of mind as well as speech).**

Dialogue can suggest a vital key to a puzzle or introduce red herrings to confuse the trail; empower debate/joint planning/teamwork in fashioning hypotheses and sketching possible scenarios for solving crimes; present opportunities for making apologies and promises, issuing admonitions and warnings; allow occasions for witty repartee and humor, as well as invective, put-down, sarcasm, and insult; and, finally, teach readers useful facts about bee-keeping, poisons, family relationships, history, law, gambling, the environment, forensic technology, the binomial theorem, monastic life, military matters, the square on the hypotenuse, etc.

In addition to all of the above, **dialogue is one of the author's most powerful tools for intensifying readers' Suspense.** Not only because of what speakers say regarding future events and the making of plans, but also *because the sequential give and take of verbal exchanges between two or more people is **inherently** dramatic and suspenseful*. Dramatic because verbal exchanges demonstrate in "real time" the interactions of personalities with issues at stake. Suspenseful because *it's not possible for readers to know with absolute certainty how one person will respond to something said by the other.* (Even the response to a simple yes-or-no question might result in surprise: if from previous knowledge readers know that, to be truthful, the responder should say 'yes' and expects that this will be the answer, the responder, in fact, might lie and say 'no.' Or the responder might equivocate, or throw up a verbal smokescreen ("Now why would I do that?"). Or not answer at all (silence is a response, too).

It is impossible for readers to know for certain what will occur next in conversation as utterances alternate between speakers, each of whom has personal needs, concerns, motives, purposes, and a unique view of the world. Readers can *guess* what the response will be to a particular utterance, but they cannot *know* for sure. *To find out, they must continue reading.* Not knowing what's coming next, but wanting to know, and caring about the outcome constitutes Suspense.

In addition to its *inherent* suspensefulness, dialogue can also intensify readers' Suspense through *specific* means. Let's look at a few of these—not

an exhaustive list; I'm sure you can come up with others.

Suspense can be created through dialogue when:

a) on the basis of their prior knowledge, readers can observe that the speakers unwittingly are talking at cross purposes, or past each other; or watch with dismay as a fundamental misunderstanding worsens and grows more profound (or heated) as the dialogue progresses.

b) when readers share the frustrations felt by protagonists or material witnesses who, truly knowing what happened/where the bodies are buried/the names behind the cover-up/the identity of the masked man, etc., try to impart this information to others but can't get anyone to take them seriously or believe what they say. (Won't Cassandra *ever* be believed? the reader wonders.) This device is used so often it's more than a cliché; it's an iconic fixture of the mystery genre, frequently predictable in the plotline and therefore tedious:—but still capable of creating Suspense as frustration builds (despite readers' possible irritation at having encountered the too-familiar device yet once again).

c) when readers, having identified with the protagonist (an amateur sleuth or private eye), experience frustration/irritation when that detective is shown disrespect, condescension, contempt, or outright hostility by the professional police investigators. (This too is an iconic fixture of the genre, frequently encountered.) (An analogous parallel occurs in the police procedural, when friction develops because of jurisdictional rivalries or turf battles—municipal police versus the FBI; precinct vs. precinct; Homicide vs. Vice; regulars vs. Internal Affairs.)

d) when through observing a series of conversations—perhaps the detective's interviews with witnesses or the murder victim's associates, or brainstorming sessions among members of an investigative team—readers gain assorted facts (or encounter crucial revelations) which enable them to start fitting things together and formulating a theory of the crime. **(Suspense arises through excitement and anticipation as the picture emerges.)**

e) when something is said in conversation that gives readers crucial information (perhaps recognized as such because of things they've "heard" in earlier conversations), but whose significance is not grasped by the speakers themselves. *(The reader then comes to know and understand something that the speakers don't.)*

f) when a speaker says something that readers know to be untrue. **(The suspense arises from knowing that the other speaker is being lied to, or misled, and wondering what later consequences this will have.)**

In *The Maltese Falcon*[1] Dashiell Hammett wrote a masterful bit of dialogue which illustrates some of the points I've been making. Detective Sam Spade and "the fat man", Casper Gutman, have met for the first time in a context of mutual suspicion and distrust. Each is trying to get the measure of the other. [I have stripped away most of the narrative description and the ascription tags identifying the speakers to reveal more clearly what Hammett has accomplished through dialogue alone. It's interesting to observe that in excellent dialogue (with only two speakers) ascription tags generally aren't needed for readers to know which character is talking (alternating speeches and internal cues do the job).

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(Gutman pours Spade a glass of whiskey, and Spade does not stop his pouring by saying "When".)

Gutman: We begin well, sir. I distrust a man that says when. If he's got to be careful not to drink too much it's because he's not to be trusted when he does. … Well, sir, here's to plain speaking and clear understanding. … [They drink.] You're a close-mouthed man?

Spade: I like to talk.

Better and better! I distrust a close-mouthed man. He generally picks the wrong time to talk and says the wrong things. Talking's something you can't do judiciously unless you keep in practice. … We'll get along, sir, that we will. … A cigar, sir. [Gives Spade a cigar. They light up.] … Now, sir, we'll talk if you like. And I'll tell you right out that I'm a man who likes talking to a man that likes to talk.

Swell. Will we talk about the black bird?

Will we? … We will. … You're the man for me, sir, a man cut along my own lines. No beating about the bush, but right to the point. 'Will we talk about the black bird?' We will. I like that, sir. I like that way of doing business. Let us talk about the black bird by all means, but first, sir, answer me a question, please, though maybe it's an unnecessary one, so we'll understand each other from the beginning. You're here as Miss O'Shaughnessy's representative?

I can't say yes or no. There's nothing certain about it either way, yet. … It depends.

It depends on—?

If I knew what it depends on I could say yes or no.

Maybe it depends on Cairo?

Maybe.

You could say, then, that the question is which of them you'll represent?

You could put it that way.

It will be one or the other?

I didn't say that.

Who else is there?

There's me.

That's wonderful, sir. … That's wonderful. I do like a man that tells you right out he's looking out for himself. Don't we all? I don't trust a man that says he's not. And the man that's telling the truth when he says he's not I distrust most of all, because he's an ass that's going contrary to the laws of nature.

Uh-huh. Now let's talk about the black bird.

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Encountered in this form, Hammett's dialogue has a theatrical effect—a story advanced through speeches and minimal physical business (like a stage play) If *heard*, accompanied by sound effects (the clink of glasses, the pouring of whiskey, the striking of a match), it could be a radio drama (and has indeed been presented in that format). What does the dialogue accomplish? It provides information about the personalities, temperaments, purposes, and verbal habits of the speakers. It advances the story by bringing Spade and Gutman into an edgy first encounter and intimates that information regarding the black bird will be forthcoming.

It pulls Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Joel Cairo (whom both Spade and the reader have met previously) into the ambient mix, and suggests to the reader that anyone who distrusts as many types of people as Gutman does is perhaps not to be trusted himself. Spade clearly doesn't trust him, as evidenced by his laconic answers. Gutman, who doesn't trust Spade, puts off for as long as possible discussing the black bird—a man who clearly likes to hear himself talk, and is himself willing to "beat about the bush" with high-sounding repetitious filler to avoid telling Spade anything of substance until he's "sure" of where the detective stands. Spade, with singular focus, will not be deflected from wanting to know about the bird.

The dialogue shows clearly how difficult it is for readers to predict with

certainty what the content will be of any response to a particular utterance. Readers read on to discover these responses, and in so doing will try to glean what they can of reliable and pertinent information relating to the problem or puzzle at hand. **While readers may not consciously analyze what the dialogue is accomplishing from the author's point of view, careful readers will at the very least assimilate the gist of what it is the author's trying to impart regarding characterization and story. All of this, the conscious and the subliminal, contributes to the readers' Suspense.**

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Before moving on to discuss tactical maneuvers, I'd like to mention two further structural devices that authors frequently use to create Suspense:

Withholding of information (from reader or protagonist)

Suspense is intensified when readers' urgent need or desire to know is thwarted, blocked, or put on hold. By exploiting their anxiety and impatience to know, an author is able to "up the ante", or increase the reader's suspense-quotient, by providing impediments and delays. One way of doing this is simply to withhold information. If necessary information is withheld from *protagonists* who are attempting to solve a crime, *their* resultant anxiety and puzzlement are shared by readers who are identifying with them and don't have the information either. The frustration the protagonist feels, combined with their own frustration, increases readers' Suspense. (The exception is the "inverted mystery story", where the readers know from the beginning who the murderer is, and the suspense they experience comes from watching the detective work the case and nail the perp.)

On the other hand, in a typical whodunit, information possessed by the detective protagonist (perhaps resulting from ratiocination—Poirot's "little grey cells" or Holmes's "science of deduction"—or simply basic good luck) is withheld from *readers*, who, desiring that information, are thereby kept in a perpetual state of Suspense, with no choice but to keep reading. However, in a well-written whodunit, the author will have "played fair" with readers by embedding clues throughout the text which would enable careful readers with ratiocinative skills to gather the same information as possessed by the detective. Since the author's aim is to sustain readers' Suspense at a high level by keeping them "guessing", these embedded clues may be disguised, hidden, submerged in extraneous material, or surrounded by false or misleading signifiers ("red herrings"). Readers who find themselves baffled will have to wait till the end for terminal action and/or the detective's explanation to "reveal all."

Still, even astute readers who *have* found all the right clues and put them together and think they have the mystery solved *don't know for sure until*

they've read all the way to the end. **_Their_ Suspense arises from having to wait to see if their solution is right.** And, if they're in the hands of very skillful authors, they may be surprised to discover at the end that they are *wrong.* Though having played fair with readers and provided all of the requisite clues to enable them to arrive at the true solution, the authors have still managed to mislead them.

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Reader's knowledge of something unknown to the detective or other characters

Authors writing in the third-person omniscient point of view can create acute Suspense for readers by giving them knowledge or awareness of something important (frequently a danger or threat) of which the protagonist and other characters of concern are ignorant. For example: if the author allows readers to observe a hit man making plans to kill someone of concern (the detective, or the Prime Minister, or the sweet old lady in the corner candy store), and then forces them to watch the plan inexorably unfold, Suspense arises as a blend of the readers' anticipatory dread, inability to warn the victim, and impotence to prevent the killing. Or, if readers have been made aware that something constitutes an important clue, they feel suspenseful anxiety or disappointment when the unaware detective overlooks or misinterprets it. Or, if knowledgeable readers watch the unwitting detective walking into a carefully set trap. Or, if readers know that something horrible—a headless corpse, an axe murderer, a spitting cobra, or (feasibly, worst of all) a malevolent Unknown Menace—is waiting in the closet as young Jennifer comes skipping down the hallway to hang up her coat, they want to shout "Don't open the door!"—but can't, of course, and must simply go on reading to see what happens.

This device does not work in a first-person narrative, where a character identified as 'I' (often the detective protagonist) is telling the story. It must be set up by author acting as the omniscient narrator who sees all, knows all, and, in this case, is letting the reader know things that the protagonist or other characters don't.

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The ways of generating and maintaining suspense I've so far mentioned strike me as essentially *structural devices*—relatively complex strategems which, in accord with their respective sets of rules and requirements, address largescale concerns. These include: revealing and withholding information, establishing internal continuity and texturing, managing the content of dialogue within the context of the whole narrative, ascertaining how characters will interact with events and with each other, planning and orchestrating the crises and dangers to be faced, planting clues, mapping the incremental emergence of facts that point to solutions, deciding whether or

not to use cliffhangers and foreshadowing, and (as will be discussed later) determining what narrative point(s) of view to adopt to best tell the story.

I would like to discuss next another set of tools which I call *tactical devices*. They too serve the strategic aim of generating and maintaining readers' Suspense. *While they are just as important as the structural devices discussed above, they operate on a smaller scale in a more immediately delimited field: the palette knife as opposed to the broad brush. Fine-tuning as opposed to macro-scanning.* In deployment and overall effect, the various types of structural and tactical devices inevitably exhibit some overlap, crossover, and interfusion; but I think that conceptually separating the two provides some very useful distinctions.

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TACTICAL DEVICES

Exciting action. The solving of intriguing puzzles. The threat of danger. Observing the interplay of interesting characters in challenging situations. The Suspense produced by all of these keeps readers turning pages. But there are other means at the author's disposal for producing Suspense. These are *tactical devices* which, though often unnoticed by readers, are pervasive in their effects, and include some of the author's most powerful tools. They include: authors' word choices; narrative pacing; withholding of information; use of setting, locale, atmosphere; and exploiting readers' subliminal and archetypal fears.

SUSPENSE AS A FUNCTION OF:

Authors' word choices

I've suggested that readers' experiencing of Suspense arises through the process of their *not knowing what comes next*, but *wanting to know*, and *caring about* what information will emerge. Getting readers to care about what happens is an author's primary responsibility, because if readers don't care, they won't finish the story. Once readers have been made to care, the author maintains their Suspense by not allowing them to know with certainty what will be coming next. This fuels their desire to know and keeps them reading. But they're not just reading pages, or paragraphs, or sentences to see what's coming next: *they're also reading words in sequence*.

Previously I've said that in dialogue it's not possible for readers to know for certain what the next speech will be, or what response will be made to a particular utterance. Now I will go further and suggest that **Suspense is generated when readers *do not know for certain what the next word will be in a sequence of words*. To maximize Suspense, it's necessary for the author to keep the reader wondering what the next word will**

be and reading on to find out.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice encounters an apparent nonsense rhyme in the first stanza of "Jabberwocky":

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimbel in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Although she can't understand it, Alice says, "It seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are." In *The Structure of English* (1952), the linguist Charles Carpenter Fries holds the view that her "ideas" are "without doubt the structural meanings for which the framework contains the signals"; and he isolates the structural signals as follows:

Twas _____, and the _____y _____s
Did _____ and _____ in the _____:
All _____y were the _____s,
And the _____ _____s _____.

The structural signals which suggest to Alice the functions of the nonsense words that fit the blanks of Fries's frame are part of the grammar of English, which all users of the language know, and which native speakers gain in childhood as they acquire it: (1) word order, which is that of conventional English; (2) function words, such as *it, was, and, the, did, in, all, were*; (3) inflectional markers, such as *–s* (noun plural) and indications of verb tense and number; and (4) co-occurrence phenomena, such as 'were the (NOUN)s' (plural verb, plural noun).

In an English utterance, the blanks in the structural frame will be filled with "content words"—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs—in accord with the given structural signals. Thus, in the original poem, *brillig* is either an adjective or a noun; *slithy* is an adjective; *toves* is a noun plural; *gyre* and *gimbel* are verbs; *wabe* is a noun; *mimsy* is an adjective; *borogoves* is a noun plural; *mome* is probably an adjective [possibly a noun]; *raths* is probably a noun plural [possibly a verb in the present tense]; *outgrabe* is probably a verb [and probably in the past tense because of past-tense 'were' in the line above]. By virtue of the structure the blank could possibly contain a noun, but probably not in this context, because that would make *raths* a present tense verb in non-agreement with past-tense 'were'. By virtue of the structure, the blank could possibly contain a noun ['The boy eats cake'], but probably not in this context, because that would make *raths* a present tense verb in non-agreement with past-tense 'were'. An adjective could also feasibly occur in the last blank: [And the painted lips red'].

All of this analysis is simply to establish (1) that there are both function [structure] words and content words in English; function words signify how the content words relate to one another, while content words have meanings that can be found in cultural usage and in standard dictionaries; (2) that English has quite rigid word-order patterns which must be conformed to; (3) that content words in forming phrases have a preferred word order (e.g., ADJ+NOUN: 'They are ADJ+NOUN PHRASE [true friends].' or 'He is ADJ [tired].', etc.; (4) that, within their given syntactic structural frames, content words have considerable flexibility, and *potentially a high degree of unpredictability*. Thus:

'Twas autumn, and the shiny leaves,
Did gleam and glisten in the wood:
All icy were the riverbanks,
And the tall trees stood.

'Twas lunchtime, and the hungry girls
Did munch and gobble in the cafeteria:
All mushy were the burritos,
And the refried beans cold.

This potential for unpredictability allows authors to avoid cliché, inject humor, make sudden surprising turns, and keep readers in suspense not knowing what to expect (since they find their expectations frequently being reversed).

Insofar as possible within the necessary linguistic boundaries that make communication possible, and in accord with requirements of maintaining contextual integrity and logical consistency, ***even on the word-level readers should be kept in the suspenseful state of not knowing with certainty what's coming next.***

In normal discourse, language provides certain standardized cues (subliminally interpreted by speakers and readers) which insure that communication does occur. These are called 'redundancy features'. They include rules of word order, inflectional endings on nouns verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, the rules that determine which words can go with which: She did it *to* him, *for* him, *with* him, *after* him, *before* him, and *through* him, but NOT *at* him. (One can't *do* things *at* people.) But: She threw the ball *at* him (one can *throw* things *at* people—as well as *to, for, with, after*, and *before them*: but NOT *through them*).

Redundancy features constitute a multiplicity of interacting signals and cues which work together to insure that communication can occur. With various pointers to aid in designating meaning, if interference knocks one or more of them out, the remaining cues can still enable the intended message to get

through. In normal language use, these features work on the unconscious level to keep readers comfortably skimming along on a current of predictability, with redundancy preventing difficulties from arising. (If too many of the redundancy cues are omitted or drop out through interference, the intended message may not get through.) ***The purpose of redundancy features is to provide predictability. But as I've said repeatedly, predictability is the great enemy of Suspense. Therefore, if authors wish to increase readers' Suspense, they have to decrease the influence of pervasive redundancy features****. (This has to be done judiciously, for some redundancy is necessary for communication to occur. Having too little redundancy can disrupt communication through allowing the creation of ambiguity or nonsense.)*

With reduced redundancy, readers will quickly learn that they've got to pay attention to the words. They can't go skimming along "on automatic pilot" thinking that they know what's coming next. If authors are committed to establishing and maintaining readers' Suspense, their language choices will help to weave a complex, inescapable net. Reduced predictability will mean that people don't dare to skip things, for fear they will miss something important. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that readers must never know *with absolute certainty* what the next substantive ("content") word will be.

The challenge for authors: they must strike a balance between allowing sufficient redundancy to make smooth reading and coherent sense, and removing enough redundancy to diminish predictability and increase suspense.

Authors can maintain readers' Suspense not only by reducing redundancy to increase unpredictability, but also by making word choices consciously designed to keep readers alert, curious, and moving forward. These tactical maneuvers can strengthen *any* type of writing.

Verbs are authors' friends. They move the action by *creating* it; they determine and reveal what happens to characters and *how* things happen; they prepare the way for future events, evoke visceral responses in readers, and present fresh views of otherwise familiar (and even dull) territory. They enable authors to avoid *telling* about actions by helping them find ways of *dramatizing* them.

Authors can accomplish this dramatization by choosing *action verbs*—those that exhibit pith and sinew, express vigor and precision, and promise some type of consequence. In the sentence I've just written, *accomplish*, *choose, exhibit*, *express*, and *promise* are action verbs.

Flaccid, vague, neutral, and passive verbs should be avoided. I could have written the sentence this way: "Authors can do this by using action verbs—those that have pith and sinew, allow for vigor and precision, and suggest some type of consequence." Now, this is a perfectly adequate sentence, and it says much of what the first sentence does: but *do*, *use*, *have, allow for*, and *suggest* do not have the "action edge" of the verbs I initially chose); do not have the precision of connotation, muscular force, and capacity for freight and forward drive. By merely "standing in place", they don't take the reader anywhere. Fortunately, to implement the "action edge", writers don't have to stretch themselves to find exotic verbs (and, in fact, stretching for the exotic is generally a grievous mistake). There are plenty of common action verbs available for the plucking. Context will point the way.

Whenever possible, authors should use *active voice* instead of *passive voice*.

ACTIVE VOICE: "The President signed the order on Tuesday."
"51% of the group decided that I should go."

PASSIVE VOICE: "The order was signed by the President on Tuesday."
"The order was signed on Tuesday." (suppressed
agent: *who* signed it?)
"It was decided by 51% of the group that I should go."
"It was decided that I should go." [*Who* decided?]

If verbs are authors' friends, **adjectives are frequently false friends and not to be trusted. Authors should avoid using adjectives whenever possible, and *avoid using vague adjectives in particular*.** In the following example, only two adjectives occur: one of them is vague.

"Linda started down the steps in the dark, keeping her hand on the wall to guide her descent. The stones were covered with slime. Now and then something slithered away from under her fingers. She gagged as the stench of rotting flesh rose to meet her. Then suddenly she heard a weird noise."

The adjective 'rotting' is necessary to characterize the stench that causes Linda to gag. Rotting flesh possesses a highly distinctive odor, and Linda would know what it was. Most readers would too.

Weird, on the other hand, is like *eerie, awful, strange, bizarre, horrific, horrible, nasty, terrible, ghastly, spooky, foul, hair-raising, blood-curdling, bone-chilling, sinister, shocking*, and *grim*: all say very little when serving as attributive adjectives. **Because these adjectives *appear* to have potency and emotional "grab", unsophisticated and lazy writers frequently use them, assuming (hoping?) that they will do their work for them to establish mood, create sensation, build suspense, and scare the reader. But they can't do the author's work. They are inherently**

vague and do not specify what it is in the things they're characterizing that *makes* those things "strange", "shocking", "blood-curdling", etc. Rather than *asserting* the quality of an experience, authors should *dramatize* it *so that readers can discover for themselves what to think and how to feel.*

In the above passage, where there is a great deal of sensory detail, 'weird' adds nothing to the creation of Suspense. The reader would much prefer to *share* Linda's auditory experience. *What* was the noise she heard? Snuffling? hissing? giggling? rhythmic thudding? a squeal? a crash? tinkling? buzzing? the flapping of wings? Encountering any of those "sounds" would be far more interesting, stimulating to the reader's imagination, and productive of Suspense than simply being told that there was 'a weird noise'. ***Precision in characterizing sensory experience can usually be achieved through use of action verbs and concrete nouns.***

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Using language as a tool for generating suspense

Suspense can be created and maintained by using language to speed up the narrative. Short sentences tend to move readers forward more quickly; long and complex ones tend to slow them down. In building to climaxes, it's usually good to speed up the narrative, and shorter sentences help to accomplish this.

Authors should avoid long-winded descriptions and expository explanations. Suspense is lessened when the reader is bogged down with verbosity and extraneous detail. The author Elmore Leonard provides sound advice to authors in his "10 Rules of Writing", several of which he mentioned during an interview by Charlie Rose on May 27, 2009: pertinent here, "leave out the parts that people tend to skip (long blocks and descriptive passages)" and "stay away from descriptions unless you're good at it. Do descriptions from point of view of the character."

Authors should not let language be a bar to readers' understanding. If they are writing to be read beyond the present moment, **they should avoid the heavy use of slang that, though speaking for its era, becomes dated as time passes, and ultimately strikes readers as opaque and quaint. Some of the pulp fiction of the 1930's and '40's reprinted in recent anthologies reveals this.** Here is an example from "Homicide Hunch" by Robert Leslie Bellem, author of the popular Dan Turner mysteries: "He had a narrow mulish puss with black sideburns running down past his ears to emphasize the glitter in his slitted glims. …He grinned as he thrust the roscoe against my favorite vest. 'Want a hole in your tweeds, snoop?' …I glued the measuring glimpse on him, wondered how much chance I had of swatting his rod aside and planting a set of fives on his sneery

panorama ….I set fire to a gasper, took a hinge around the joint. …When I piped this divan, I widened my peepers and choked: 'What the—?' There was a blonde quail stretched out on the glossy cushions, trussed hand and hoof with knotted ropes. Her piquant pan would have been gorgeous even without its heavy makeup." [quoted in *Tough Guys and Dangerous Dames*, ed. Robert E. Weinberg, Stefan Dziemianowicz, and Martin H. Greenberg (Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), pp. 462-463].

Authors should be sparing in the use of simile and metaphor. (Raymond Chandler, who was proficient at coining similes, perhaps used them too much. ("Oh, here's another one," the reader says.) When similes begin to call attention to themselves, they tend to slow the reader down (e.g., "The sunset was like an open wound.") and thus jeopardize the intensity of the Suspense that's been established.

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Writing dialogue; use of speech ascription tags

Dialogue is a highly efficient way to move the story, create suspense, enhance dramatic intensity and interest, and provide information. **In writing mystery fiction (or fiction of any type), authors should use dialogue as much as possible. In addition to everything else it does, it removes the necessity for long passages of expository description, and therefore contributes to the creation of suspense by speeding things up.**

There are some rules for writing effective dialogue that immediately come to mind. **(1) Speeches should reflect the way people actually talk—using contractions, sentence fragments, ejaculations and swear-words—in keeping with the speaker's character, upbringing and habits, the physical environment, and the contextual circumstances in which the dialogue occurs.**

Equally important: (2) authors should make sure that all the characters don't talk the same way. Their speech should be consistent with their regional and social dialects, social and educational standing, habits of mind, temperament, aims and motives.

In writing dialogue, (3) authors should use as few ascription tags as possible, identifying speakers by their order in sequence, verbal echoes, providing answers to questions that clearly follow from the questions asked, and other internal cues, such as—at *long* intervals— use of the other speaker's name:

She stared at him in disbelief. "Oh, John, do you really believe that?"
He shook his head. "Not since I was ten years old."

"Good. I thought I was going to have to call in a psychiatrist."
"You should've let me know. I could've recommended one."
"Oh, no need for that. I'd simply call mine."

When speech ascription tags are needed, authors would be wise to use 'said', 'asked', 'replied'. (*maybe* 'shouted') almost exclusively. The frequent use of 'said' does not constitute "repetition" in the usual sense. Readers barely notice the occurrences, taking them more as iconic sign-posts than actual words. The redundancy these verbs confer because of their familiarity enables readers to log them in subliminally in passing; they do not call attention to themselves as would more exotic ascription verbs, such as *screamed*, *opined*, *ruminated*, ("Oh really?" she *smiled*.), *hissed*, *squealed*, ("I'll get you," he *threatened)*, *whinnied, mumbled,* ("I want my supper!" he *thundered*.), *laughed, snorted*, *cackled*, *smirked*, *sobbed*, *cried*, etc. On *Charlie Rose*, Elmore Leonard advised, "Never use another verb to identify speaker except 'said'" and "never use an adverb to modify 'said'" (i.e., 'he said quickly').

Ascription tags are usually required when there are more than two people talking together. Even so, there are various ways of avoiding ascription tags: line two in the passage above ('He shook his head.') is an example of just one of them.

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Narrative pacing

In narrative, **pacing** is the relative speed at which action proceeds, plot elements proliferate, and information becomes available; the speed is "relative", because the *rates* at which plot incidents occur and revelations emerge are *variable*, and of the author's choosing. In an extended work, this variability is valuable for providing diverse dynamics: propulsive, pell-mell forward motion, incremental tightening of the screws for climactic showdowns, textural contrasts, opportunities for character development, and, for readers, breathing space and time for reflection.

Pacing has both a macro and a micro dimension. There is the pacing of the work seen as a whole [macro], and, in addition, there are the separate pacings of the subordinate component parts [micro]. Each of these parts, having its own distinct integrity, contributes to the arc of the whole.

Each mystery, being unique unto itself, will have its own macro-pacing requirements. Perhaps it will have a slow beginning, "setting the stage" for what's ahead, or perhaps it will leap forward as at the crack of an opening gun. Perhaps in the middle, it will race straight down the track leaping hurdles as they come, or perhaps it will lead protagonist (and reader) into a labyrinth of complications booby-trapped with perils. The ending will perhaps

be a straightforward unmasking of the murderer and an orderly recounting of clues that led to the solution; or perhaps it will plunge the protagonist into a crisis with an outcome far from certain.

Macro-pacing pertains to largescale structures. If we go to music for an analogy, we see that in a symphony or concerto, there is a large unified structure with a beginning, middle, and ending and an aggregate pattern of pacing; and that frequently this whole is divided into sections, or movements, each of which has its *own* structure (beginning, middle, end), developmental needs, and pacing. In both the whole and in the subordinate parts, the structures exhibit the development of melodic materials, recurrent motifs, and variations on specific themes. Since musical expression, writing, and reading literature are phenomena that occur during a span of time, there are ample occasions and strong arguments for shifts in pacing. These in music have their analogs in mystery-writing: changes in tempo (fast/slow) and dynamics (loud/soft; stressful/calm), building of tension to climax and closure. **In fiction, each unit of plot development, each sequencing of events, each individual scene and dramatic encounter, each instance of dialogue will have its own internal micro-pacing that will create and maintain the reader's Suspense.**

Finally, authors should be *extremely* sparing in their use of assertive "there-you-have-it" foreshadowings (see page 11), **for, while they *do* generate suspense of a rudimentary sort, people get tired of them; and frequent use gives readers the impression that the author is blatantly "priming the pump."**
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Use of setting, locale, and atmosphere to generate Suspense

Since stories typically take place *somewhere*—in a city's mean streets or the Kansas wheat fields, in prisons, high-rise office suites, hospitals, automobiles, schools, gambling casinos, factories, graveyards, jungles, governmental agencies, oceanside resorts, etc.—authors should turn those environments to account to generate Suspense. Imagine what different kinds of mysteries could be written with settings as diverse as Dartmoor; Vienna, 1882; the Mayan ruins at Chichén Itzá; a large hotel; a tramp steamer adrift in the Pacific; a ski resort; a university common room; a morgue.

In some stories, it's setting that makes the story possible (Jack London's "To Build a Fire"; the Yorkshire moors in *Wuthering Heights*); in many others, setting has a major role to play in establishing mood and determining incident. And therefore, **in setting and locale authors have a powerful tool for creating Suspense.**

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, for example, while suspense is created in part by the family legend of the supernatural hound and by the eccentric neighbors, it's the physical environment that contributes most: the isolation of the moor, the obscuring fog (which hides life-threatening dangers), the gloomy Hall, the dark of night, and (to be shunned) the Great Grimpen Mire which can suck down men as well as ponies. Contrariwise, in what appears to be a cozy village nestled in the countryside, with jolly neighbors and sunlit church bazaars, cold-blooded murder can occur among the rhododendrons, and unspeakable horrors lurk behind locked attic doors. Highly specialized settings can provide unusual and intriguing business: e.g., backstage at the theater, a scientific outpost in the Antarctic, a rodeo, a cruise liner in the Caribbean, a traveling carnival or circus, a séance, a highway construction site, an art museum, a restaurant, a hunting trip in the African or Canadian wilderness, a concentration camp).

To illustrate how setting can be made to establish atmosphere and mood, and to generate suspense by hinting of unpleasantness to come, I'd like to quote the opening sentence of "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe, the great-great-grandfather of us all.

"During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher." (60 words)

Though Poe has used more adjectives than I would normally recommend, he uses them quite effectively; note how many of them *concretely* (as opposed to vaguely) characterize the nouns they modify. We know *what kind of a day it is*: dull, dark, and soundless, with clouds hanging oppressively low; we know *when the day is in the calendar* (in the autumn of the year); we know *who is speaking*: a character named 'I' who has been traveling *alone* on horseback for the whole day; we know *something of the locale*: a singularly dreary tract of country; we know *the time of day*: evening (with its ominous creeping shadows) and we know *what the speaker sees in the distance*. The adjective 'melancholy' is evocative, and we want to know *why* the house is so characterized. Since we don't know why the traveler sees it so, and he merely asserts it, is this adjective perhaps self-indulgent on Poe's part? At any rate, Poe accomplishes a great deal in this sentence—with consummate efficiency.

[As an aside, contrast this with the opening sentence of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado", which also generates suspense:

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (21 words)

We don't know who Fortunato is; we don't know what the thousand injuries consisted of; we don't know the nature of the insult; and maybe we don't need to know. But we do know that the 'I' has vowed revenge. And though as readers we *don't know* yet what this will be, we certainly *want to know*.]

Finally, as a subclass of the category of setting/locale, I'll mention **the power of *isolation* to generate suspense.** [Examples: an empty road through a blasted heath, a mountain cabin in a blizzard, a secluded island with no helicopter, boat, or telephone, a dark cellar ("No one will hear your screams.")] **Anxiety, fear, and a sense of helplessness arise when characters are cut off from contact with other people, from means of succor, rescue, or support. Many mystery writers have found this to be an effective device for generating suspense. When featured in a story in combination with other types of suspense-generating devices, *isolation* can augment and enhance the effect of those.**

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Exploiting readers' subliminal and archetypal fears

I'll mention one other tactical device for generating Suspense: **authors' exploiting in their fiction readers' subliminal and archetypal fears.** There are some fears that seem indigenous to the human species. They're widely distributed around the globe, among diverse peoples and cultures and civilizations (including those that have never been in contact). Very ancient, many of these fears are represented through event, symbol, and metaphor in mankind's oldest literary texts and incorporated into the sacred writings, symbology, myths, and doctrines of the world's great religions. When these fears are stoked and fostered, they produce powerful emotional responses, including anxiety and terror. **If authors are adept at evoking such fears through their writings, they have at hand a ready tool for creating Suspense. Readers who experience these fear-based emotions will want them assuaged; but not knowing if or when or how the author will accomplish this, they must keep reading to find out.**

Without becoming too Jungian, I'd suggest that these fears constitute a kind of "racial memory" or "collective unconscious" expressed—perhaps overtly, perhaps obliquely through metaphor—in ancient myths, legends, and the grimmer sort of folk and fairy tales. In human affairs, they've manifested themselves for thousands of years as superstitions, warnings to the unwary, and diverse rituals designed to cure, exorcise, or forestall evils that the fears attest.

Many of these archetypal fears exist subliminally, in the pre-conscious, until something occurs to bring them to the surface. In mystery fiction, they and the Suspense they engender may be central to the story, or perhaps peripheral to other elements. But if authors want to evoke these ancient,

universal fears to generate Suspense, they must use narrative means to force them out of the shadows into the characters' *and readers'* **conscious awareness**. ["Yes, dear Character (and Gentle Reader), there really *is* a Bogeyman, and he's waiting for you just there, in the dark at the top of the stairs." Or, "You, Character, have sinned, and we're going to punish you by cutting off your nose and gouging out your eyes and sending you into the world with a tin cup to beg your bread."] These fears are the stuff of nightmare. I'll list a few. You can probably come up with more.

a) Fear of the supernatural: (ghosts, demonic possession, zombies, mummies (the undead generally), ghouls, werewolves, -tigers, -jaguars, trolls, vampires, witches, formal curses, etc.

[Why is the Vampire so evocative and pervasive as an iconic figure of terror? Western culture, at least, will not let it go.] Don't take it as a joke when I say, Vampires have existed for a very long time—in various guises, with mixed qualities of horror and eroticism. Yes, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is wordy and a little stuffy (told through long journal entries!), but it does have an exciting and scary climax. And yes, though Tod Browning's and Bela Lugosi's memorable film version (1931) may look a little campy now, it too was an iconic event that spawned a host of vampire movies that have continued to the present day (a large part of the actor Christopher Lee's career was devoted to playing the Count). So familiar has the figure of the vampire become, it lends itself to parody and self-parody; it may be that the fascination which the figure still exerts (*Why* the fascination?) which brought forth all the stories, films, TV shows, and comic books, allowed people to be comfortable with and even feel affection for a creature which, on its own terms and undomesticated, would be too frightening to contemplate. Has this relaxed acceptance of the Vampire diluted and neutralized its capacity to inspire terror, and enabled people to de-fang the object of their fear? Perhaps so. ***But, still …***]

b) Fear of the permanent loss of something precious (a child, something entrusted to one's safekeeping, a rare and potent talisman, one's eyesight, one's "immortal" soul)

c) Fear of abandonment, abduction, being physically lost (in the woods, in the desert, in the mountains, at sea)

d) Fear of the dark and what might be lurking in it unseen (total eclipses of the sun, blackouts, the thing in the closet or under the bed)

e) Fear of the Evil Eye and of being cursed (by opening the mummy's tomb, by the ire of the voodoo priestess, by the Australian aborigine's pointing the bone, etc.**)**

f) Claustrophobia (fear of tight spaces, such as small closets, long sewer pipes, caves, mines [the underground generally], being trapped, cornered, or confined. (In the 19th century, premature burial was a pervasive fear.)

g) Agoraphobia (fear of open spaces and going out among people)

h) Fear of snakes , spiders, and wild beasts (snakes have had a bad rap since long before the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament; and the ancient Greeks had Medusa, whose face with snaky hair turned folks to stone.)

i) Fear of fire and being burned (at the stake, in Hell)

j) Fear of disfigurement

k) Fear of being exiled and cast out (from the tribe, the Elect, the family, the homeland, the village, the Faith; into the wilderness, outer darkness, perpetual wandering, the lake of eternal pain)

l) Fear of heights, of falling

m) Fear of losing one's identity or memory

n) Fear of losing one's sanity

o) Fear of the doppelgänger, double, or "fetch" (*Gilgamesh* [c. 1300 B.C.]; Poe, "William Wilson"; Dostoyevsky, *The Double*; Stevenson, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"; Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"; Conrad, "The Secret Sharer"; Henry James, "The Jolly Corner")

Evoking any of these fears could be an effective way for an author to create Suspense.
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Narrative strategies

Point of view

A story is told from one or more vantage points of observation; this principle has traditionally been called adoption of a "point of view". An author's selection of the point of view from which a story is told is ***a strategic decision***. That choice will determine the structure of the narrative, open certain avenues for characters' observations and interactions and foreclose others, dictate either a narrow or a panoramic scope in relating action and revealing information, provide or deny characters certain types of knowledge, and—for the author—allow or disallow certain devices for generating

Suspense**. Choosing the narrative point of view is one of the most important decisions an author makes.**

The points of view conventionally available to authors are 1) first-person; 2) second-person; 3) third-person limited; 4) third-person omniscient. Let's take each of these options in turn and see what it provides for creating Suspense, and what it precludes.

FIRST PERSON

Sometimes *one (or more) of the characters tells the story*—in which case the Narrator of the moment is designated "I" (though of course s/he may have a given name as well, such as V. I. Warshawski or Philip Marlowe). **This mode of telling is called '*first-person point of view'*.**

ADVANTAGES — Immediacy: it draws the reader in. The "I" who narrates the story may be the protagonist, an associate or friend of the protagonist, another character, or someone "outside" the story proper—someone in a frame narrative, perhaps, who is telling a story within the story, or perhaps a fictional scholar who's editing a manuscript text of the story, etc. **Using the first-person point of view enables authors to create a complex and detailed persona as storyteller who has a full-blown personality with values, tics, biases, perhaps blind spots and personal problems (raising the possibility of authors' ironic exploitation if the "I" is untrustworthy, dense, insane, or a liar). With a first-person narrative, readers get to know the personality, thoughts, opinions, and habits of the protagonist "from the inside."**

As a bonus in adopting the first-person point of view, authors can use the persona of the protagonist as a proxy to register their *own* opinions, judgments, political commentary, or social criticisms. Since readers tend to identify with the "I" narrator, they may find themselves "sharing", or giving credence to, the protagonist's views. When using the third person-limited point of view, or the third-person-omniscient, authors can put their opinions and commentary into the mouths of particular characters as well; but in "first-person" narrative there is an intimate immediacy in doing so.

LIMITATIONS **—**The author, committed to the point of view of "I," who is narrating the story, is not free to range through time and space at will, or get into other people's heads. *Only what "I" sees, hears, is present at, or learns can be known to "I". And, since "I" is the one telling the reader about it,* ***that's all the reader knows.***

Now, what implications does all this have for generating Suspense?

Protagonist as first-person narrator

If the protagonist is the first-person narrator, s/he is telling the audience about events *after they have happened and the mystery is solved.* Thus, since readers *know*, as a base-line, that the first-person narrator survives to tell the tale (i.e., that all dangers will have been circumvented), *they don't have to endure the Suspense of dreading the protagonist's demise.* **[They still experience the suspenseful anticipation of learning how s/he survived the dangers, and they experience the immediate Suspense of watching the escapes. And of course there is the Suspense of watching the unfolding of events**, **the coming of crises, and the perils faced by other characters.]**

This point of view enables the author easily to withhold information from the reader. 1) Since everything is seen from "I's" perspective, what "I" doesn't know, the reader doesn't know. 2) As first-person storyteller, the protagonist reveals only what s/he wants to be revealed *while the story progresses* (i.e., the narrator can choose to keep readers in the dark as to events and thought processes, or, conversely, can share with readers as the story unfolds). Bottom line: *the protagonist, "looking back" to tell the story, knows EVERYTHING that happened up to the time of the telling; and, as narrator (and "purported author" of the story), can withhold whatever information from readers that s/he wishes.*

The first-person point of view is a powerful way of telling a story and engendering Suspense. It's been very popular with mystery writers, particularly those whose protagonists are private investigators or amateur sleuths.

Unreliable first-person narrator

A rarely encountered subclass of the first-person narrative is **the story told from the point of view of an unreliable narrato**r. There are various reasons why the narrator might be unreliable: s/he might be hiding a personal secret, might be a compulsive liar, might be self-deluded, might be the guilty party, might be mentally deranged. If readers recognize that there's something "fishy" about the narrator, then a skeptical guessing game will begin in earnest as to what is, and what is not, to be believed; if they don't recognize the fishiness, they'll be in for frustrating ambiguity or a major surprise.

Frame narrative

Stories may be told as stories-within-stories, typically as a frame narrative containing one or more inset narratives. In the first-person frame narrative, the author creates a persona who tells a fictional audience a story in which

s/he is a participating character, or an eye-witness to the events recounted. This is a standard narrative device used since ancient times in many cultures.

In English literature, Chaucer used it in writing *The Canterbury Tales* where, as author, he created a character representing himself on the pilgrimage to Canterbury. Chaucer (poet) created Chaucer (pilgrim) to introduce the other pilgrims who told stories in their own right. Chaucer (pilgrim) referred to himself as 'I'. But Chaucer (poet) is not Chaucer (pilgrim). In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad created a character named Marlow who tells a group of listeners the story of his trip to the heart of the Belgian Congo in search of the mysterious Kurtz. The character named Marlow who narrates the inset story *as a participant* is to be distinguished from the character Marlow in the frame narrative *who recounts the story-within-a-story*. Both, in their respective narratives, refer to themselves as 'I'. And of course neither of them is Conrad.

(Theoretically, there's no limit to the number of frames and stories that can occur in a single work: the work can assume a structure like that of a Russian doll containing ever smaller versions, one nesting within the other. In practical terms, however, such a structure could become burdensome to both author and reader, the device ultimately calling attention to itself to the detriment of the piece as a whole.) *To reach closure (and logical coherence) in writing a narrative with multiple frames and inset stories, the author must come out again sequentially in reverse order through the various frames to the starting place.*

First-person narrator as a companion/observer of the detective protagonist

A good example of the companion/observer is Dr. Watson, the first-person narrator in most of the Sherlock Holmes stories. As a reliable narrator, and a character distinguished by his honesty, intelligence, courage, loyalty, and occasional humor he merits the reader's trust. But, by not being as good at deductive reasoning as Holmes is, he must always be enlightened at the conclusion of the mystery. His need to know (which matches the readers') provides a foil to highlight the detective's brilliance. ("Dear me, Holmes, I confess I'm baffled. However did you figure that out?" And Holmes always obliges by telling him. **That Holmes doesn't let Watson know his thinking while solving the problem is Doyle's way of maintaining his readers in a state of anticipation and Suspense.**)

First-person narration through diaries and exchange of letters

Stories have been told through sequences of diary or journal entries, through a series of personal letters sent and received, and through extended

monologues. All of these would, as a baseline, employ first-person point of view—although any of these forms might contain anecdotal material (as reports or gossip) in the third-person point of view ("I remember Charlie's first date with Marilyn. They went to Barney's for fish-and-chips, and then they caught the ferry . . ."). Such anecdotes, constituting stories-within-a-story, cause the diaries, letters, or monologues that **contain** them to serve virtually as frames for the embedded narratives *while they are being recounted*. But on the macro level, the diaries, letters, or monologues have their own *first-person* stories to tell.

SECOND PERSON

Rarely, a rather disembodied, nameless narrator addresses the reader as "you"; this is called **'*second-person narrative'***. In prose fiction it's rarely encountered; it tends to work best in short passages, for it's difficult to sustain. **It's a form not conducive to generating Suspense.**

ADVANTAGES — immediacy: it draws readers in by addressing them directly as "you" and making them undergo the actions and events; the reader becomes a character in the story (and the protagonist).

LIMITATIONS — the author is not free to range through time and space without taking "you" (the reader) along as baggage. Since "you" must always be talked at, the name *you* is constantly repeated (*unless the directive imperative mood is adopted, in which case the 'you' is omitted*). This point of view quickly becomes tedious unless very skillfully handled. For long works, it should be avoided.

THIRD PERSON

Third-person (Limited):

"Third-person / Limited" is a type of "third-person point of view" in which a single character (called by name, or 'he' or 'she' by the nameless Narrator) is followed through the story as a central observer, and everything is seen through his or her eyes; the reader is thus limited to seeing and knowing only what this central observer sees and knows.

A variation of this mode allows the author to choose at will *different* characters to serve as the central observer now and again as the story progresses; in this type of narration, with its shifting central observer, the point of view, with its attendant limitations, is restricted to only *one character at a time*. Each character may see and know different things from the others; the *reader* will see and know what each of them sees and knows. It follows that the reader

may develop a complex composite understanding of events, etc. that surpasses the knowledge of the main central observer, or protagonist. This state of affairs gives the author opportunities for building Suspense of various kinds, and for injecting irony and humor into the story.

ADVANTAGES — the author can get into the central observer's head, can describe or otherwise delineate the character's feelings and opinions. In order to generate Suspense, **information can easily be withheld from the central observer and thus from the reader as well (as in first-person narrative).** Though the reader can still be made to identify with the protagonist, there *is* a slight distancing (the reader is more a spectator here than in the first-person mode of narration, where identification with the "I" character makes the *reader* a "character", or "participant", in the story). If authors so desire, **the possibility of seeing things from the point of view of various central observers could allow the author to sequentially dramatize** *the same single event from multiple points of view.*

LIMITATIONS — the author is committed to the point of view of whichever character is the central observer at any given moment; thus no information can be provided the reader beyond what that character knows through direct experience or hearsay. When *a single character* is taken as the central observer (the protagonist, or a sidekick such as Dr. Watson) and rigorously followed throughout the story, the nameless Narrator does not have the possibility of ranging through time and space to depict various theaters of action or reveal other characters' thoughts*.* However, when *multiple characters* take their turns at being the central observer, the nameless Narrator has more freedom to range over time and place, and the enjoys some of the flexibility possessed by the Omniscient Narrator (see below). A typical technique is to use ***Omniscient*** for general overviews or summaries and for bridges between scenes, and then to use ***Third-person / Limited*** (choosing a particular character as central observer) for *specific scenes*. It might be the *same* character for each scene throughout, or *different* characters for different scenes. This combination technique provides the author more flexibility, a chance to avoid the limitations of the pure form of ***Third person / Limited [one central observer]***, and, when different characters take turns at being the central observer, expanded opportunities for developing characterization.

Some stories are more effectively told with first-person point of view, some with third-person / limited, some with third-person / omniscient, and conceivably even some with second-person.

Third-person / Omniscient Narrator

Sometimes the story is told by *a nameless Narrator who sees all, knows all; who can range over time and space, and get into any character's head*: this is ***"omniscient narration". It usually employs 'third-person point of view', in which characters are referred to by name, or by 'he', 'she'***, ***and 'they'****. In a sense, an Omniscient Narrator is outside the story, looking "in", seeing it all—not a character in any conventional sense of the term.*

ADVANTAGES — **authors** have great flexibility; they see all, know all from the disembodied Omniscient Narrator's point of view, can depict simultaneous actions in different locations, for time and space present no boundaries. The author chooses how "external" or how "internal" the narrative is to be at any particular time. The author can get into any character's head to reveal their thoughts and feelings (while still selecting and choosing what the reader is to know, and what information is to be withheld). Readers get to share in this all-encompassing view, and, through various identifications, find it easy to become vicarious participants in the story.

LIMITATIONS — There are some dangers the author should guard against. If not well handled, the omniscient point of view can lack immediacy, can fail to engage readers and draw them in, holding them off at arm's length, so to speak. There might also be a tendency to ramble, or get wordy, or drift into long discursive passages, to forfeit ECONOMY and TACT. Such a wealth of available information to choose from can cause the author to lose sight of priorities and bury the important in the trivial. There is also a danger of *telling* too much, and not *showing* enough through dramatization; *explaining* too much, drawing conclusions for readers rather than letting them draw their own.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

First-person narrative. "I climbed the stairs and saw Sheila standing near the window. She seemed to be crying. Before she saw me, I turned and went down again so as not to embarrass her."

Second-person narrative—discursive: "You climb the stairs and see Sheila standing near the window. She seems to be crying. Before she sees you, you turn and go down again so as not to embarrass her." *(NOTE that verbs are in the present tense.)*

Or, second-person can be couched as a ***directive***: "Climb the stairs. See Sheila standing near the window. She seems to be crying. Turn and go down again so as not to embarrass her."

Third-person narrative (limited): "He climbed the stairs and saw Sheila standing near the window. She seemed to him to be crying. So as not to embarrass her, he turned and went down again before she saw him."

Third-person narrative (omniscient): "He climbed the stairs and saw Sheila standing near the window. She seemed to him to be crying, though in fact she wasn't. So as not to embarrass her, he turned and went down again before she saw him. He needn't have worried; Sheila was preoccupied with watching Charles and Henrietta playing croquet on the lawn. 'Bloody bitch,' she thought."

Note that *second-person narrative* tends to be told in the present-tense of the verb, or else in the imperative mood. *First-* and *third-person narratives* may be told in either the present or past tense. The past tense has been used in the examples above. Compare those with these present-tense versions: "I climb the stairs and see Sheila standing near the window. She seems to be crying. Before she sees me, I turn and go down again..." and "He climbs the stairs and sees Sheila standing near the window. She seems to him to be crying, though in fact she isn't...."

***Present-tense* confers a kind of immediacy to the narration, pulling the reader in;** it can be overdone—and if that occurs, the mode becomes heavy-handed and tedious. ***Past tense* slightly distances the narration (tending to put the reader more into the role of a spectator than a participant); but if the narrative is sufficiently compelling and well-told, the reader is drawn in nonetheless.** Past-tense is the traditional, usual, and "natural" way that we recount stories: "The last man on the earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door ..."[2].

Which mode of narration authors adopt for telling the story, which point of view(s) they choose to tell it from, which tense they choose to put the verbs into—all of these are crucial strategic decisions which must made. For particular aims, and for particular narratives, there might be a *best* way to do it. If so, the author's job is to find that best way.

Each of these modes of narration has advantages and limitations, both inherently, and with regard to creating Suspense for the reader.

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Withholding information
As I've defined it for literary contexts, Suspense is a state of mind created when readers (a) *do not know* what's coming next in the narrative or what the outcome of a conflict or sequence of events will be, but (b) *want to know*, and (c) *care about what happens*. *It follows, then, that **authors can increase or intensify readers' Suspense by withholding the desired***

information. There are several ways of doing this. (See also pp. 16-17.)

When the requisite information is something (knowledge of motive, occurrence of event, results of analysis or interpretation, etc.) which **structurally** pertains to the setup of the crime, the dynamics of character interaction, the unfolding of the mystery, or the developmental working out of a solution, etc., the following tactics for withholding might apply:

a) *The author can let the reader know that the desired information does exist but is currently not accessible.* Various characters may make reference to it (though it may be equally inaccessible to them): [Joanna was getting impatient. "Look, I saw him take the ring from his dead mother's hand; but I don't know where he hid it, and now he's dead too."]. Or, the author or *first-person narrator* may hint—broadly or subtly—that the information will be forthcoming, but postpone revealing it till a later time: ["I can't talk now. I'll meet you for breakfast at Adolph's at nine-thirty tomorrow and explain the whole thing. You'll be amazed."] If a *third-person omniscient narrator* does the hinting directly (without using a character as intermediary), the intimation comes close to being **"there-you-have-it" foreshadowing**: [Harriet promised Herbert that she'd bring the letter to the office so he could see for himself. He breathed a sigh of relief. "Should I tell John?" he asked. Oh hell, Harriet thought; Herbert always jumps the gun. "Not yet," she said. "We've got to get our signals straight before letting him in on it. There's too much at stake."]. Or, in Eric Ambler's *A Coffin for Dimitrios*: [Marukakis speaking to Latimer:] "'If you find out any more about him in Belgrade I should like you to write to me. Would you do that?' 'Of course.' But Latimer was not to reach Belgrade."[3]

To the extent that readers are sure (1) that the information withheld is crucial to understanding the mystery's key components or (2) promises grave potential consequences for characters or the outcomes of important events, their Suspense can only be heightened by the delay.

b) *Authors may interpose actions or particular events which delay the reader's obtaining the desired information.* **In addition to increasing readers' Suspense through the *delays* caused by these interventions, *authors can capitalize on the inherent capacities of the interposed actions and events themselves to generate their own types of Suspense.***

c) *For various reasons, characters within the story who claim to possess the desired information may fail to share it with other characters [and the reader] (through inadvertence, or being distracted or interrupted):* ["I was waiting for your call. I can only talk a minute, but I need to tell you what happened at the funeral; it's very important. Oh, just a minute, Grace. I'll be

right back; someone's at the door."])*. Or, they may be unable to share it (through absence, death, or being comatose), or may choose not to.* **Whatever the reason(s), the reader's frustration at having the information withheld when closely within reach greatly augments the Suspense they feel. For authors, this type of withholding may also help to structure the narrative and calibrate the story's pacing.**

However, they must keep in mind that *it's not good to frustrate the reader too much*; at a certain point most people get irritated with being held off at arm's length. *Performing this fine-tuning (just enough but not too much) is one of the author's most difficult tasks.*

d) *In a first-person narrative, the protagonist or sidekick/observer who knows the required information may choose not to tell the reader* (Philip Marlowe, Dr. Watson). (Both are telling the story after the events have occurred and, as they "write it out", for *them* the mystery "has been solved." But, hoping to entertain and (perhaps) challenge their readers, they avoid "connecting the dots" that show how the events and clues fit together, and do not reveal the final solution until the story's end.)

e) **In a third-person narrative (limited or omniscient) it's usually the author directly, and *not* the protagonist or sidekick, who keeps desired information from readers, or, alternatively, allows them just enough to be tantalized (which further increases their Suspense.).** In third-person limited and omniscient-narrator stories, the *protagonists* themselves may not have the requisite information either.

f) *Readers may be deceived by some character who, having the requisite information, misrepresents it by telling lies.* In a first-person protagonist narrative, it will be the narrator/protagonist who is lied to. If that narrator says: "Judy told me he was her father, and I believed it. But I found out later she was lying," there is no suspense generated in the reader, because there is no information withheld. If, on the other hand, the first-person protagonist (Philip Marlowe) or the first-person companion/observer (Dr. Watson) suppresses his "retrospective knowledge" that the information was untrue when he first received it and withholds that information from readers until such later time in the story that he himself came to realize the lie [see (d), above], *that revelation will be news to the readers (even as it was to the narrator/observer) and will perhaps come as a startling surprise*. In rare cases, an unreliable first-person narrator may be the one telling the lies.

In writing a third-person limited or third-person omniscient narrative, the author can simply have a character tell a lie (which, for the reader, may pass for the truth), and wait till later for the unmasking [see (e), above]. *If authors use this device as a means of withholding, at some point they must enable readers to become aware of the deception in order to rectify their*

false impression. Finding that a crucial piece of information thought to be true is actually a lie forces readers to reassess their previous assumptions, speculations, and understandings. **Having to arrive at a new mental configuration produces its own type of Suspense.**

g) *If they've missed the cues and clues that the author has planted, or have been misled by author's false trails and misdirections, readers may not be aware that the information they desire* **is** *accessible.* Allowing for this possibility, authors—to play fair—should probably provide additional clues or alternative avenues of revelation that would help a careful reader obtain the required information. (This is the redundancy principle put to good use.)

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Flashbacks

A flashback is a narrative device that takes the reader backward in time to observe "firsthand" the dramatization of events that took place prior to the story's present unfolding. Structurally a flashback is an inset piece within the frame narrative of the story proper. **Readers' knowledge that they're witnessing past events which have a bearing on the "present" may dilute whatever Suspense the action of the flashback might have engendered in its own right.** While readers' curiosity may prompt a desire to know precisely *what* effects the depicted actions had on subsequent events (a kind of Suspense), observing those actions (known to be in the past) may not have the same urgency as experiencing the progressive unfolding of the main narrative. **Flashbacks may not have the same potency for generating Suspense as actions whose outcomes are not yet determined, and authors should be aware of this.**

A particular flashback may be one of a series of flashbacks depicting a sequence of steps that collectively develop a composite picture. Watching this incremental shaping of an emerging complexity can generate Suspense. As an example, I will use the analogy of a classic motion picture, familiar to many, that illustrates the principle clearly (in this case, a picture *is* worth ten thousand words)—Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*:

Within the frame narrative of a reporter's quest to understand the complexities of the deceased Charles Foster Kane, a portrait of the tycoon emerges from the dramatized recollections of people who knew him. It's only a partial portrait, of course, because each of the sources has only personal, limited knowledge of Kane to recall. The movie opens with a flashback: Kane's death, and his final word, the mysterious "Rosebud". Determined to learn the meaning of 'Rosebud', the reporter reads a diary and interviews a number of people. He learns much (and the audience learns it with him, through watching dramatized flashbacks), but he doesn't learn the significance to Kane of his dying word. He admits defeat, and, as central

observer, leaves the stage. The camera's eye, assuming the role of omniscient narrator, then zooms to a bonfire consuming the detritus of Kane's life; and there, for one moment, the audience sees the child's sled that had been important to Kane in his loveless and blighted childhood, its painted brand name blistering in the flames: ROSEBUD. And, for the audience, much becomes clear.

Flashbacks may help to explain "how we got here", but they tend to reveal information rather than withhold it. **Watching a dramatized flashback may generate topical or immediate suspense in readers as the action plays out; and the information that a flashback provides may indeed answer questions raised by present action in the main narrative. But this topical, localized Suspense generated by particular flashbacks is separate from that which arises from experiencing the accumulation of information provided by a *series* of flashbacks.** The essence of flashback is *dramatizing* what happened, not telling about it. Telling without showing is simply recounting, or abstract summary. **Abstract summary doesn't generate Suspense.**

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Playing fair with readers' needs and expectations

Authors must respect their readers. They can't afford to alienate them, talk down to them, irritate, or bore them. Readers have discretion, after all, to choose which books they wish to commit part of their life-time to reading. It's therefore to authors' advantage and material benefit to regard their readers as friends and allies, engaging with them in a shared (and hopefully enjoyable) experience.

Mystery-writers (particularly of the whodunit variety, who set puzzles for readers to solve) engage with their readers in a mutually-understood game. Their job is to keep readers from discovering the truth before the story's end. Readers who choose to play will accept the challenge and try to solve the mystery before the protagonist does. This friendly competition between author and reader, like all games, is governed by rules of play. *Since authors—knowing all along "who done it"—have the advantage over readers, they must play fair by providing readers all of the essential clues which the protagonist uses to solve the crime.* These clues may be disguised, hidden in a welter of detail, or upstaged by misleading "red herrings" drawn across the trail—but all of that is within the rules of the game; and readers, expecting to be misled, know that they've got to be on their toes. *But the clues have to be there*. Otherwise, the author is *not* playing fair.

The author must be mindful of readers' needs and expectations: *one of their expectations is that the author will play fair.* No last-minute revelations for which there's been no preparation. No rabbits out of hats, no forgotten wills

popping out of secret drawers, no alibi-busting traffic tickets or hotel receipts that no one knew existed, no gods descending with ropes and creaking pulleys from the flyloft to set things right. If readers decide that an author hasn't played fair with them, but has hedged, or fudged, or cheated, they very well may choose not to read more of that author's books.

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Narrative jokes analogous to mystery stories in the creation of Suspense

For writers of mysteries concerned with maximizing readers' Suspense, a useful analogy might be found in the suspensefulness typical of narrative jokes. These jokes are fictional constructs cast in a story-telling format. [Other sorts of jokes—puns, knock-knock jokes, question-and-answer jokes (Why does a chicken cross the road?, How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?, What did the plumber say to the priest from under the sink?, etc.), dirty limericks, and satiric epigrams—achieve their humorous effects through different means and won't be discussed here.]

Humor in narrative jokes arises from ludicrous situations, reversals of expectation, misunderstandings, juxtaposition of unusual or contradictory elements, hyperbole and exaggeration, the deflation of pomposity, and the intellectual appreciation of verbal wit. The *essence* of the humor in narrative jokes is **surprise**: *the audience must not be able to predict the outcome of the narrative (the punchline, or conclusion)*.

If the outcome is predictable, or if listeners realize they've heard the joke before, there is no surprise or expectation of surprise, and hence no narrative Suspense. Knowing this leads tellers of jokes to say "Stop me if you've heard this one." Or, "Did you hear the one about …?". If a listener knows what's coming, telling the joke isn't worth the effort. Which raises the question, *Why* do people tell jokes?

Beyond establishing a kind of social bonding and setting an affable tone for subsequent personal interactions, telling jokes provides a highly stylized medium for sharing pleasurable experience and producing laughter. The teller hopes to give pleasure and make the listener laugh. Accomplishing this is pleasurable to the teller. The listener chooses to listen to the joke in the hope that it will be funny. This process produces anticipatory Suspense for each: the tellers hope that the joke won't fall flat and dread that it might; the listeners hope that the joke will be worthwhile (surprising and funny), and dread that it won't be, or that it will prove to be in bad taste or embarrassingly bad, in which case they will have to feign enjoyment or register offense if truly offended. **These anticipations and anxieties create much Suspense: and neither party knows how things will go until the joke is told.**

The suspense generated by waiting for the punchline can be enhanced by the teller's mode of telling. Most narrative jokes are told from the third person omniscient point of view; the teller is not personally involved but tells the story from "outside": ["Three nuns were crossing the street…", or "Old George liked his beer; could polish off two bottles and a half while everybody else was opening their first; then he'd laugh at them for being so slow. Well, Harley Sipes, he got tired of this and decided to play a trick on George…"]. Humorous narratives told in first-person tend to be personal anecdotes.

Some people are better at telling jokes than others. One component of telling a joke well is the teller's skill at being able to increase and maintain the listener's Suspense in moving toward the punchline. As with any storytelling, a great deal hinges on pacing and timing. If there is dialogue within the joke, the "speeches" must be rendered well; and if there are ethnic dialects among the "characters", the teller can enhance the experience by mimicking their traits. Some jokes, like some children's stories, are episodic, with repetitive features that incrementally build to a climax ("Goldilocks and the Three Bears", "The Little Red Hen" ["Who will help me bake the bread?" "Not I," said Ducky Lucky, Goosey Poosey, Turkey Lurkey, and Foxy Loxy…], "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" (who have to deal with the Troll under the Bridge—and do). In the skillful telling of jokes all of these structural considerations contribute to the listener's Suspense.

And sometimes there is a significant intellectual component as well. I will conclude with a joke of layered complexity: a geriatric joke with physical disability at the core, but benign and humorous for all that, and speaking to the human condition we all share. The teller should differentiate the voices of the three speakers. It's a joke of just the right length, totally unpredictable on first hearing—and even when familiar still capable of evoking a smile:

Three elderly Englishmen are on a train. One looks out the window and says, "Good Lord, it's Wembley!"
The second says, "No, it's not. It's Thursday."
The third says, "So am I. Let's get a drink."

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Conclusion

In a literary context, **Suspense is a state of mind created when readers (a) *do not know* what's coming next in the narrative or what the outcome of a conflict or sequence of events will be, but (b) *want to know*, and (c) *care about what happens***. In the course of a well-written narrative, readers will experience many types of Suspense generated by various structural and tactical devices that authors have ready to hand. *All* elements of a story can (and should) contribute to the creation of Suspense:

plotting, pacing, characterization (and characters' interactions); challenges and difficulties to overcome, dangers to face, problems to solve; crises and the withholding of information; dialogue that characterizes, looks forward and backward, and both reveals and conceals; choice of words and sentence structure (so that readers do not know with certainty, even in a particular phrase, what word is coming next). To maximize Suspense, authors must *eliminate predictability (that great Enemy) whenever possible*, and *establish clearly the expectation of surprise*.

Suspense is a chief component of narratives that people want to read. It is the *sine qua non* of mystery-writing, and a major requirement for *most* types of writing. Without it, pages will not turn.

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[1]*The Maltese Falcon:* © renewed by Dashiell Hammett, 1957
[2]Fredric Brown, "Knock". In *Shot in the Dark*, ed. Judith Merril
    (Bantam Books, 1950), p. 40
[3]Eric Ambler, *A Coffin for Dimitrios*. In *Intrigue: Four Great Spy Novels
    of Eric Ambler* (Alfred A. Knopf, reprint, 1960), p. 202

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