

Directions: Annotate the following article using the highlight text tool. Also write comments on the screen with questions, connections, ideas. You need at least one comment per section. At the end of the article, please write a 5 sentence response identifying what you think is the most important way to build suspense and explain why.

Building Suspense: How to Keep the Audience on the Edge of Their Seat

By C J Perry

As a screenwriter, the ability to keep the audience on the edge of their seat can turn your script from a basic, by the numbers story into something memorable, and the basis of a movie that people will remember. Film is a visceral art, and a thousand things have to go right in the execution of a story to make it resonate, but it all starts with the screenwriter. Without the basic foundation and the proper storytelling tools, your script might not make it past the first read.

Evoke Emotion

Create sympathetic characters that the audience likes and can relate to. After all, the characters are the ones who are telling the majority of your story, through their actions and dialogue. This can be accomplished in several different ways. As Steve Zissou, in “The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou,” by Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach, Bill Murray is hardly playing a classic sympathetic character. He seems to be a weirdly obsessed oceanographer with a singular vision. But Anderson, Baumbach and Murray have created a thoroughly broken human being, and one the audience wants to get his chance at redemption. He bluntly tells Ned (Owen Wilson), the biological son that has found him that he “hated fathers, and I never wanted to be one,” but by the end of the film, Steve establishes a connection with Ned and those around him.

Create Conflict

At the heart of a compelling story is rising conflict. This is your chance to take the audience for a ride. If you craft a tight story with interesting opposing forces, the audience will go along. In “The Perfect Storm,” by William D. Wittliff (based on the novel by Sebastian Junger), we’re sympathetic to the crew of the Andrea Gail. They are working class guys, with wives and girlfriends at home, with bills to pay. The viewer gets drawn in as the conditions become increasingly dire; things start to go wrong on the ship as the storm becomes stronger. This feeling of impending doom, that something

will happen, plays out as the skies darken and each rolling wave gets a little bit bigger, setting up a showdown between man and nature.

Provide Opposition

The main character or characters need a powerful opposition; it's not easy manipulation but the basis of most compelling drama when your protagonist has to face someone or something that stands between them and their goal. The opposition should be in a position of strength. Your audience should be rooting for your main character to overcome insurmountable odds or a seemingly unbeatable enemy. In "Alien," written by Dan O'Bannon (with Ronald Shusett receiving a co-credit for the story), it is Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), as the last crew member of the Nostromo left standing, who must ultimately dispatch the alien. Throughout the film, the alien works in the shadows and the ductwork (and of course inside the human body as well), acquiring an air of invincibility. The tension doesn't let up until the final scene until she finally figures out a way to be rid of it for once and all.

Build Expectation

Give the audience the sense that *something* will happen, that there is an expectation for trouble. One of the most famous examples of this is in "The Untouchables," by David Mamet. Elliot Ness (Kevin Costner) and his men are lying in wait for Al Capone (Robert DeNiro) at the train station. As the federal agents get into position, the juxtaposition of clocks and their faces give the sense of rising tension. And at the top of the stairs is a woman with a baby carriage, and the viewer can just *feel* that she and the carriage are going to get in the way and something bad will happen.

Increase Tension

Let the audience know something that your characters don't. If the audience is hooked, they'll want to know what happens, and if it matches what they believe. In "Superman II," written by Mario Puzo & David Newman & Leslie Newman, Superman/Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) is unaware that Zod, Ursa, and Non, criminals from Krypton, have been released by an explosion. As they run amok all over earth, he has actually relinquished his powers to be with Lois Lane (Margot Kidder). As the fate of the world hangs in the balance, the audience wonders what will happen when Superman finds out.

Use Surprise

In “Psycho,” written by Joseph Stefano (based on a novel by Robert Bloch) Marion (Janet Leigh) is killed early, and there’s only one more violent act in the movie. This event shocked the audience early, and made sure that everybody was on the edge of their seat throughout.

Create Immediacy

If your audience cares about your characters, then they will care about what they are fighting for. It should be a tangible, relatable goal that people in some way can identify with. “Saving Private Ryan,” written by Robert Rodat, is a powerful and memorable film because the goals of the soldiers, aside from saving Ryan (Matt Damon) is to eventually return home safe from the war. And they all know that if they save him, they get that much closer.

Establish Consequences

This is tied in with creating immediacy. As your viewer gets more involved with your characters, they need to know that something important or terrible will happen if your main character or characters do not reach their goal. “War Games,” written by Lawrence Lasker and Walter F. Parkes, works because all of the rising tension points to one thing: if David (Matthew Broderick) can’t find a way to stop the computer from inputting missile launch codes, nuclear annihilation is the end result.

Limit Time

Establishing a finite time for your protagonist to reach his or her goal increases the suspense. “Three O’Clock High,” by Richard Christian Matheson and Thomas E. Szollosi is dominated by clocks and a looming deadline, much in the way “High Noon” is. Jerry Mitchell (Casey Siemaszko), an archetypal nerdy high school newspaper writer, will do anything to avoid fighting the new kid, the mysterious Buddy Revell (Richard Tyson). The plot surges forward because everything in the film will be settled by the final bell.

Maintain Doubt

Nothing kills suspense like a foregone conclusion. This doesn’t mean to fill your script with red herrings, because this may frustrate and ultimately put off your audience. But if you build suspense in a meaningful way, and leave room for doubt, you can draw the viewer in and keep them thinking and guessing. “Looking for Mr. Goodbar,” written by Richard Brooks (based on the novel by Judith Rossner), follows Theresa (Diane

Keaton) on her journey throughout the singles' scene of the 1970s. Who's good and who's bad? Does it matter? Do you know what will happen to her? By the end of the movie, those questions are answered, and not in the way that most audience members would have seen coming.

By using different elements to build suspense and tension, you can elevate your screenplay. The truly memorable movies that we always go back to are the ones that blend a compelling story that builds throughout the film with the characters that we want to see complete the journey.

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