

Peaks, Promises, and Bombshells

By Emily Suvada, Willamette Writers' Conference August 2, 2020

This workshop explores tools to craft your story in a way that keeps readers engaged, intrigued, and, most importantly—rewarded. We'll focus on scene-level and arc-level structural tools, common pitfalls, and a brainstorming activity to help you build these tools into your own writing.

Why do readers keep turning the pages?

Why do some books keep readers hooked? Unputdownable books all follow three rules:

- 1) The world, its characters, and all the plotlines must be believable.
- 2) All these elements must be, on some level, enjoyable.
- 3) At every point in the story, the reader must want to know what happens next.

Managing point 3) boils down to maintaining **tension**. Readers tend to put down a book when the tension drops, and especially at the end of a scene or chapter. How do we avoid this drop in tension? First, let's take a look at what tension is:

Tension is anticipation combined with stakes.

Your scene might have a sense of stakes, but if there's no anticipation that something bad will actually *happen*, there doesn't tend to be any tension. Similarly, you might be building anticipation that something is going to happen in the next scene of your book, but if there aren't clearly communicated stakes, the reader often says "Okay, that'll be a fun scene, I'll read it tomorrow."

Writing books that are unputdownable means crafting strategies to help you consciously manage both of these things.

What are Stakes?

Stakes are created in a story when the possibility of one of these outcomes exists for the main character (not an exhaustive list!):

- They'll get hurt or die.
- They'll lose something important: a person, job, home, or something sentimental.
- They'll lose something intangible: personal power, security, or control over themselves.
- They'll be embarrassed, disappoint others, lose status, or be emotionally devastated.
- Their life will be upended: their comfortable, secure existence will be threatened.
- They'll fail to achieve a goal: winning, attracting a lover, improving their life.

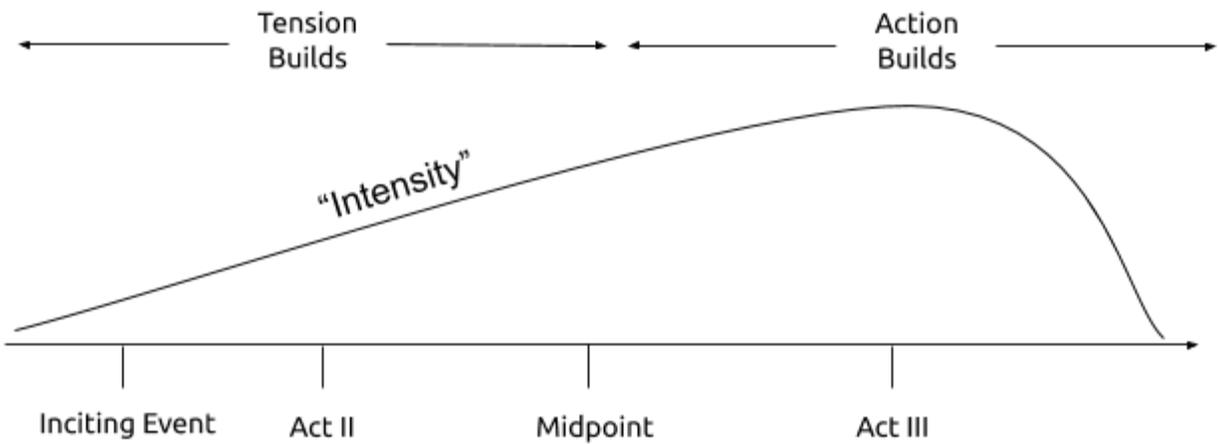
Stakes are central to a good plot, but you also need micro-stakes in every scene. Maintaining tension means **telling the reader constantly that something bad might happen soon**.

What about Anticipation?

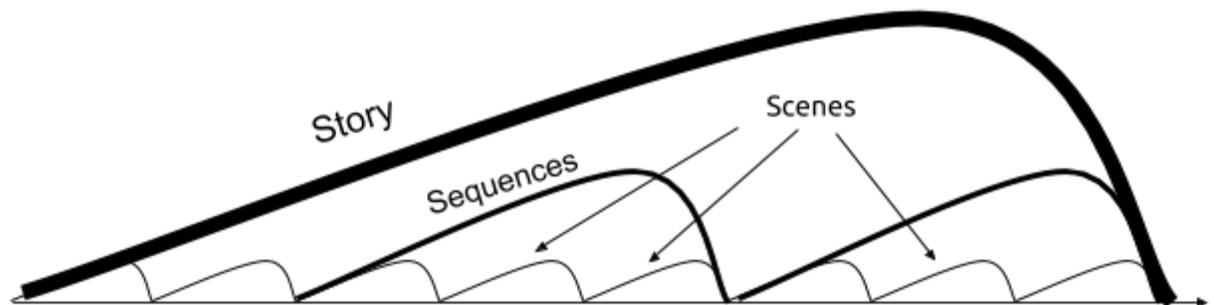
The second ingredient in managing tension is anticipation, which is created via foreshadowing, and can occur in many ways (not an exhaustive list!):

- Small clues to the reader: narrative focus on details, senses, etc.
- Use of tropes: ticking clock, Chekhov's gun, etc.
- Direct narration/dialogue: the characters literally tell us something is going to happen.
- Bombshells: new information which changes the story, but we don't know how yet.
- Liminal settings: a doorway, a portal, a train, a car ride, etc.
- Established, clear beats for genre stories: romance, mystery, thriller, horror.
- Dramatic events that precede action: arguments, engine trouble, storm clouds.

You're probably already building anticipation into the first half of each scene of your story, as well as the story itself, by following the most popular format for scene and story structure:



The pattern repeats in every scene, and every sequence of scenes:



But you can see on the scene-level scale, there are many natural drops in intensity at the end of each sequence or scene. This is inevitably where readers lose interest and put down a book. So how do we combat this? You've probably heard the advice:

Make your scenes and chapters end in cliffhangers.

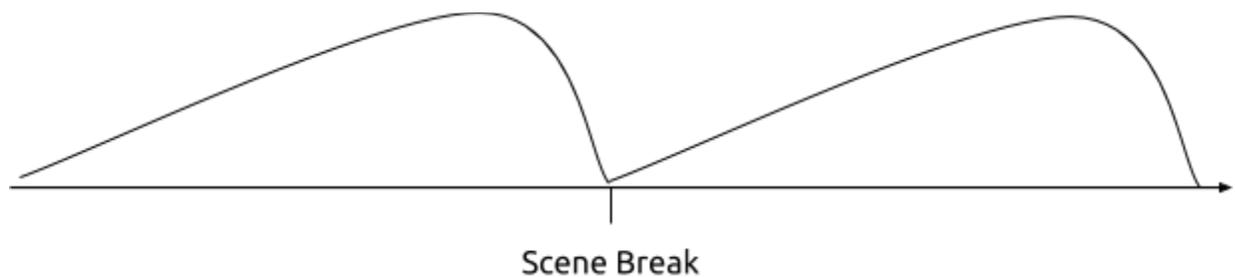
How to Craft Cliffhangers

The term “cliffhanger” is from television, where a character would be left hanging on to the edge of a cliff, and the viewer would have to sit through advertisements or watch the next episode to see how they escape. Cliffhangers often end with explosions, gunshots, or car crashes. But blowing something up at the end of every scene in your novel won't work. Many people confuse tension with action, and lump them together as “intensity” or “excitement”, but it's important to separate them in your mind, as tension and action are actually opposites:

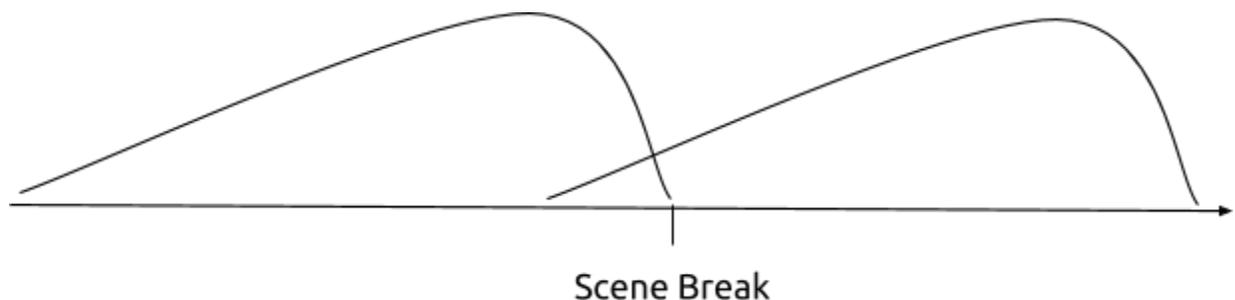
Tension is the promise something will happen. Action is the “something” that's promised.

We don't need to end each chapter with action, because action isn't what keeps readers hooked. We need to end each chapter with **tension - anticipation combined with stakes.**

So how can we do this? There's a simple strategy. Instead of organizing scenes like this:



We can merge them, and use the **inciting event** of the next scene as our break:



This means that as each scene is winding down, but before the intensity completely drops, we start winding up again for the next scene. This requires more careful foreshadowing and planning so that the new scene doesn't start abruptly or in a disjointed way, and doesn't feel to the reader like you've simply moved your chapter break.

It isn't a strategy you need to do with every chapter, or one to always use the same way throughout your book. Sometimes it's important to close all the threads at the end of a sequence and allow time to pass during a chapter break. But it is a useful strategy to have in your toolbox.

Types of Cliffhangers

Just like there are many ways to build anticipation, and many forms of stakes, there are many types of cliffhangers, which I like to group into three main categories:

- 1) Promises: lower-intensity moments of doubt, worry, excitement, etc.
- 2) Peaks: action, violence, kissing, shouting, drama!
- 3) Bombshells: twists, messages, surprise information dropping.

Defining cliffhangers like this allows us to look at the way they're used across a novel, and to define some rules.

Cliffhanger Rules

These rules aren't set in stone, and I break them regularly, but they're very useful to keep in mind when plotting and developing a scene.

- The first rule is that **too many Peaks become boring**. We're not usually afraid that characters will die or be seriously hurt, so the effect can wear off and the reader will roll their eyes.
- The second rule is that **Promises must lead to Peaks**. You can't spend chapter after chapter building tension and not deliver with action. Too many Promises make it feel like the author doesn't have enough plot to fill their book.
- The third rule is that **Peaks should be followed by another Peak, or a Bombshell**. Peaks signal the beginning of an action scene, and the quickest way to drop tension in a novel is to wrap up the action that's been Promised. The best way to engage readers after a Peak is to drop a twist in the story. When the dust from the explosion clears, let there be a shocking twist revealed in its wake.
- The final rule is that **Bombshells must always raise the stakes**. Whatever new information twists the story, it must always make things for your character more dangerous, desperate, risky, or leave them with more to lose.

The format I tend to follow through sequences of chapters is:

Promise > Peak > Bombshell

Only, there are often several promises in the lead-up to a Peak, and most of my action scenes are spread across multiple Peaks.

Again - this structure and the tools in this workshop aren't a substitute for a moving, gorgeously-written, deeply intriguing story, but they are helpful to understand!

Exercise: The Fetch Quest

Fetch quests are a common trope in video games, books and movies. The hero must complete a task, obtain an object, deliver a package, find a person, etc, to progress the plot. We'll sketch out three scenes of a simple fetch quest today:

- 1) Your protagonist learns they need to obtain an object in order to progress the plot.
- 2) They discuss the object and how to get it with their deuteragonist.
- 3) They attempt to get the object.

Activity 1: Define the Quest

Write down the first things to come to mind for these prompts, and brainstorm several ideas for things the hero might need - at least three, and pick your favorite.

Genre (Lit, SF, Historical, etc)	
Setting (Time, Location, Style)	
Characters (Jobs, Cliques, etc)	
What could they need?	

Activity 2: Define the Stakes

Let the choices you made in Activity 1 guide you here.

Scene 3 - Attempting to get the object

How does your hero try to obtain the object? For the stakes, think beyond success and failure.

Event (theft, scam, deal, plea, task, etc)	Stakes (pain, reputation, death, arrest, etc)

Scene 2 - Discussing the object with the deuteragonist

We've defined the event - a conversation - but we need actions surrounding it, and to define the stakes linked to the relationship.

Actions (packing, traveling, training, etc)	Stakes (vulnerability, fighting, etc)

Scene 1 - The hero learns they need the object

Don't define this scene thoroughly - the basic idea is that your character hit a snag or were dealt a blow while following the plot. Whatever it is, they'll learn they need the object here.

What's the snag?

Activity 3: Define the Scene Breaks

We now know to layer our scenes so that each leads into the next by using their inciting events as cliffhangers. They must offer a guarantee of something happening and something at stake in the next scenes. Since we've sketched out three scenes, we'll only build scene breaks for the first two, but there is an exercise below if you want to extend this sequence into a series of promises, peaks, and a bombshell.

Scene 1 - The hero learns they need the object

Brainstorm an inciting event to use as a cliffhanger that showcases the stakes of the next scene as well as the events.

What's the inciting event that will happen at the end of this scene?
How are you showing what's going to be at stake?

Scene 2 - Discussing the object with the deuteragonist

We need an inciting event to put at the end of Scene 2. Again, make sure you focus on what's immediately at stake in the next scene.

What's the inciting event that will happen at the end of this scene?
How are you showing what's at stake?

Extension Activity: Promises, peaks, and bombshells.

Now that we've learned how to craft cliffhangers, and the various types to use, can you brainstorm ways to extend your fetch quest into a series of Promises, Peaks, and a Bombshell? Can you figure out a Peak that could have happened to begin this sequence, and sketch out Scene 1? Can you helicopter your Scene 3 and split it into two scenes with a Peak in the middle? Is there enough tension to split Scene 2 and add in a Promise?

Then, going further - what happens when the character succeeds or fails in obtaining the object? Is the object what they expected, or does it instead reveal a bombshell that twists the plot and propels the characters in a new direction? Can you make sure this bombshell raises the stakes for the characters?