

THRILL A MINUTE

Structuring A Thriller



Every good thriller has its timing down to a science. The plot moves ahead like a clock ticking off the minutes. This article explores what makes the best thrillers work. Use these techniques to build a strong story and keep your audience on the edge of their seats.

GENRE AND SUB-GENRE

Ask anyone if they've seen a good thriller recently and you'll hear a myriad of titles. The thriller seems to have merged with several other genres to become a catch-all for any film that has a strong, suspenseful plot.

Back in the day, thrillers were as clear as the name indicates: stories that thrill. Hitchcock was the master. He built tension from the sim-

plest situations. A photographer with a broken leg watching his neighbors (*Rear Window*). Two friends playing an intellectual game (*Rope*). A newly-married woman moving into her husband's home (*Rebecca*).

Very few films are just simple thrillers now. This merging of genres reflects the sophisticated tastes of modern audiences. They demand complex, challenging stories. For better or for worse, the fusion trend makes finding a true thriller much more difficult.

Thrillers are ultimately defined by a strong, steady plotline. The primary function of the story is to create suspense and tension. The purest forms of thrillers today (as opposed to action-thrillers and science fiction thrillers) can be broken into three sub-genres: psycho-

logical thrillers, supernatural thrillers, and horror thrillers. Each of these sub-genres function first as a thriller with the descriptor only indicating the source of the tension.

Psychological thrillers work much like the stories in Hitchcock's films. The tension comes from human beings in compromising situations. Recent examples of psychological thrillers include *Cold Creek Manor*, *Panic Room*, and *Insomnia*. The protagonist and the antagonist are gripped in a conflict so intense that the resolution is usually death.

Supernatural thrillers build tension using mysterious, and usually paranormal, forces. Inexplicable events pull the protagonist to investigate a mystery and to unravel what the force is trying to communicate. In *Gothika* and

What Lies Beneath, the protagonist is chosen to resolve unfinished business and cannot escape the supernatural force until all of the secrets are revealed.

Horror thrillers use the conventions of the psychological and the supernatural thrillers, but are generally much more graphic and waste no time in establishing the story's tension. Audiences may dispute whether the film belongs in the thriller or in the horror category. Films such as *The Ring*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Psycho* straddle this line.

Semantics aside, thrillers are ultimately defined by *suspense*. If the fundamental purpose of the story is to make the audience jump, you've got yourself a thriller. The best thrillers blend tension, strong plot structure, and empathetic characters to draw an audience

deep into the story and keep them guessing until the final moments.

TENSION

Audiences walk into a thriller with high expectations. They want to be challenged with a complex mystery and original surprises. Well-versed audiences have watched

Once that shot has been fired, you begin the dance between winding up the tension and releasing it. Between each step, you weave a story.

One of the most popular thrillers in years, *The Ring* lays out the story's mystery, tension, and dilemma in the first scene. By the time the protagonist appears, the audi-

wait too long to establish the tension, you'll be pushing throughout the entire story to get any response at all.

Rather than hitting the audience in the first scene, psychological thrillers spend time building the situation and the characters. The tension comes from the anticipated conflict. *Cold Creek Manor* and

mystery of both the paranormal and the plot to create tension. In *Gothika* and *What Lies Beneath*, a supernatural force appears with a story to tell. The tension results from not knowing whether the force is good or evil. The plot unravels and the tension builds as the protagonist solves the mystery behind the force's appearance.



every plot and seen every device. The challenge for a writer lies in respecting the conventions of the genre while coming up with original twists on old themes.

When writing a thriller, you must always remember that the story is defined by the tension. Write that down. Put it on your fridge. Make a screensaver for your laptop. The audience will be frustrated and bored if the story does not deliver tension and suspense. Without these elements, you are writing a drama.

Strong thrillers must set the tone from the very first scene in the movie. This puts the audience on the edge of their seats immediately. By opening your story with a strong, tense scene, you have already delivered. They no longer have to wait for the first bang.

ence already knows what she is up against. The threat has been established and the audience is completely tense. All because of a videotape, a rumor, and a phone call.

The second most important aspect of creating tension is establishing the threat. While the audience may not know what is causing the threat, they must know that the protagonist is in danger. Without a threat, there is no tension.

Horror-thrillers establish the threat immediately. Both *The Ring* and *The Sixth Sense* open with a bang. With the audience already on edge, the writer can then take the time to build a story and unravel a mystery.

Tension operates on the principle of inertia. Starting the ball is the hard part. Once it's rolling, there is much less effort involved. If you

The Panic Room spend most of the first act just setting up the protagonist's situation.

This luxury of building the tension slowly comes from the fact that the antagonist is blatantly obvious once s/he is introduced. As soon as the antagonist appears, the audience is tense. For writers, this puts all the pressure on creating a powerful antagonist and a viable conflict.

This tension can be harder to maintain without resorting to clichés. *The Panic Room* uses a clever and unique situation to sustain the audience's interest. *Cold Creek Manor* weaves a treacherous, yet intriguing, backstory into the plot. Never assume the audience will be satisfied with a simple device. Always keep reaching for a complicated and original story.

Supernatural thrillers rely on the

Tension and suspense are all about timing. First, you must understand the type of story you are telling. The type of story determines the source and the timing of your tension. With these elements in place, you can build the second most critical aspect of a thriller: a tight structure.

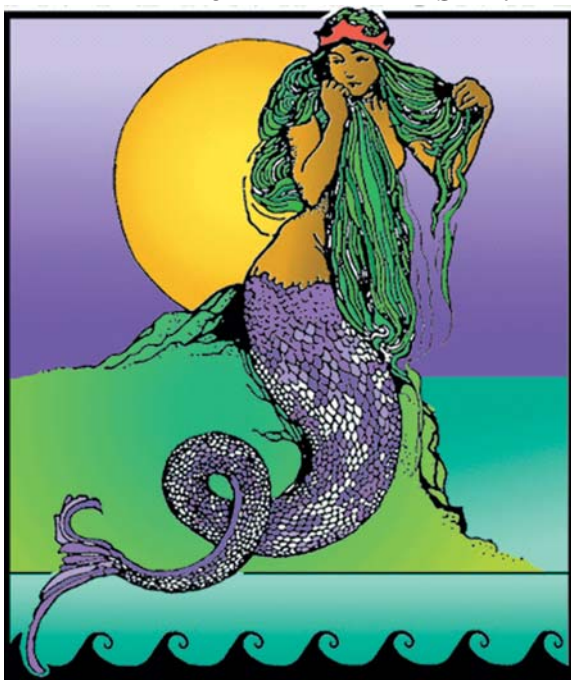
STRUCTURE

Dramas rely on character development. Thrillers depend on precision timing. If you want to maintain the audience's attention, the plot must advance every three to five minutes. The movement may be small, but the story must always be pushing forward.

The best thrillers time their structure like clockwork. The Inciting Incident occurs within the first 10-15

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minutes. The first major turning point occurs at minute 22-25. The half-way point when everything begins to unravel and the pace picks up is between minute 50-60 (depending on the length of the film). The second turning point happens at minute 75-80 and the climax occurs five minutes before the resolution.

mystery drives the plot. The plot pushes the character development. This act provides the meat of the story and must always stay one step ahead of the audience. In *Gothika*, the psychologist must unravel the mystery of both her own suppressed memories and the strange force that landed her in the psychiatric ward. She spends

Thrillers work best when they are highly-structured and function within the conventions of the genre.

This probably sounds terribly mathematical and dull. Ironically, the tight timing keeps the plot sharp and interesting. When the story must move forward in every second scene, there is very little room for wasted dialogue and repeated beats.

The alternate scenes provide an opportunity for character connection and tension release. Yes. Tension release. You need calm scenes in order to make optimal use of the tense scenes. This also lets you ratchet up the tension at a slower pace. As a result, there will still be room for the highest point of tension in the film, the climax.

As an exercise, rent one of your favorite thrillers. Sit down in front of the screen with paper and a pen. Mark each significant plot movement and each significant revelation. Regardless of the kind of thriller, the plot will move forward every three to five minutes.

Within the structure, Act One is used to introduce the protagonist, establish the threat and set the stage for the mystery. The act ends with the first plot point determining the protagonist's jeopardy. In *The Ring*, the writer sets the stage with the videotape, introduces the reporter as the protagonist, provides a call to action from her sister (the grieving mother), establishes the mystery surrounding the deaths, and seals the protagonist's fate by giving her seven days to live. *The Ring* actually builds the ticking time clock right into the plot; leveraging a classic device to set tension and move the story.

Act Two sets the protagonist in motion to unravel the mystery. The

first half of this act figuring out who landed her in the ward and the second half determining what happened to this girl. Unraveling the mystery leads naturally to the second plot point. The mystery becomes clear as the tension builds.

Act Three is all about revealing the mystery, the clash between the antagonist and the protagonist, and building to the climax and the resolution. The action in the third act must move forward every two to three minutes. Everything you have built in the story culminates in this act. The writing, the reading, and the watching should be tense, fast, and active. In *What Lies Beneath*, the protagonist makes a shocking revelation at the second turning point. From that moment, her life is in jeopardy right up to a fight to the death with the antagonist.

CHARACTER

Unlike dramas and comedies, character development is the least important aspect of a thriller. The plot and tension must take precedence. Character empathy is, however, critical. If the audience doesn't at least sympathize with your protagonist, they won't connect to the story and the tension will be ineffective.

In all thrillers, the audience is tied very tightly to the protagonist's journey. They discover information either just before or just as the protagonist makes the same discovery. As a result, the audience must like and understand the protagonist enough to root for her.

The best protagonists balance

strength and vulnerability. Strength makes the audience respect the character, while vulnerability opens the gate to sympathy and potential failure. The classic thriller protagonist is an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances.

Consider the protagonists in *The Ring*, *Gothika*, *What Lies Beneath*, *The Sixth Sense*, and any other top thriller. Unlike action heroes, thriller protagonists could be your neighbor. Or a member of the audience who happened to be having the worst week of her life.

By contrast, the antagonist, whether supernatural or human, must be formidable. The antagonist sets up the extraordinary circumstances that push the protagonist and determine the conflict. In order for the tension to work, the antagonist must present a life and death threat. Or, as in *Gothika* and *The Sixth Sense*, create a significant enough threat to the protagonist's

reality—the death of their life as they know it.

From this conflict and the consequences, the protagonist generally learns a life lesson. While this is not significant character growth as seen in a drama, dealing with such a strong foe necessitates strength, action, and a satisfying resolution. External conflict is critical; internal conflict is entirely optional.

SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

The final key element to any thriller is a strong, believable world. This is especially important in supernatural thrillers. If you are using forces that are outside of the normal understanding of day-to-day existence, you must establish the rules of behavior.

As long as the rules are consistent, the audience will suspend disbelief. The moment you break the rules or they becoming confusing,

you decimate the story's credibility. Once the credibility is ruined, the tension deflates. Don't even consider taking the easy way out. Savvy audiences spot even the smallest story holes.

The other possibility when playing outside of the norm is to include a character that doesn't believe in the paranormal. Always consider your story as though you were overhearing it at a coffee shop. What would you think if the person one table over was explaining that she was getting messages from a dead girl (*Gothika*)? Or thought she witnessed a murder out her back window (*Rear Window*)?

If you include a "Scully" in your script, you are voicing the audience's doubts out loud. By doing this, you give them the room to believe. Someone else is already playing the skeptic. The skeptic can be an ally, like the ex-lover

in *The Ring*, or the antagonist, like in *What Lies Beneath*. They function as one more lock on your secure world.

THRILLING RESULTS

Thrillers work best when they are highly-structured and function within the conventions of the genre. Rather than seeing the structure as a limitation, embrace the tight box as a challenge to your creativity. Use the framework to weave a strong mystery that keeps just one step ahead of the audience. The reward could be an exciting page-turner that takes the box-office by storm.

Kate is a writer/producer based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. She works locally as a script reader, columnist, story editor, and film juror. Kate currently has three feature films and a television series in development. For the latest news on her career, check out her website: www.scriptgrrl.com.

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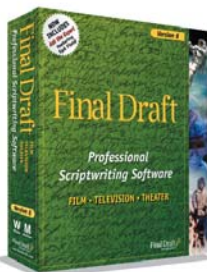
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