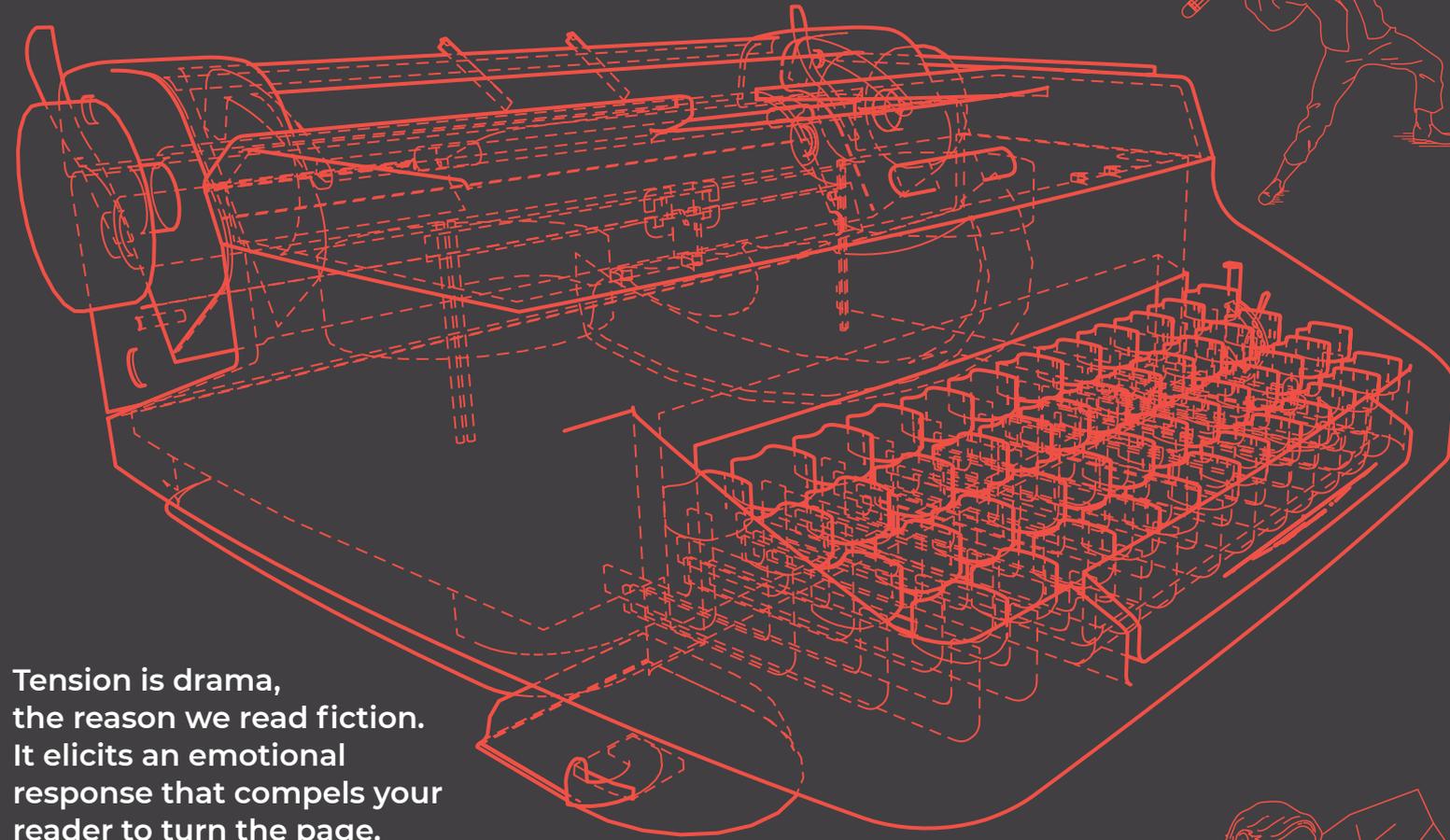


# The Elements of Tension

Enhance Your Story With the Fundamentals of Conflict



Tension is drama, the reason we read fiction. It elicits an emotional response that compels your reader to turn the page.

**Tension arises from conflict, but they are not the same.**

## BIG STAKES MAKE FOR AN EPIC QUEST

That doesn't mean your protagonist must save the world. Stakes should be both particular and universal: star-crossed lovers, bounty hunters, megalomaniacal whalers, or their true worst enemy—theirself.



## WORDS HIT HARDER THAN HARPOONS

Dialogue is as much a battle for power as a fistfight. It reveals depth of character through subtext, emotion, wit, manipulation, persuasion, and humor.

## MOST CONFLICT ARISES FROM CHARACTERS' OPPOSING DESIRES, NEEDS, AND GOALS

Thus, a character must want something, "even if it's just a glass of water," as Kurt Vonnegut says. The grander the needs, the higher the stakes.

But a character must first lack something, be flawed, or believe an untruth. An antagonist who possesses opposite desires (thus hindering the protagonist's quest) creates pure conflict.



## STRUCTURE AFFECTS TENSION: ACTION SHOULD RISE AND FALL OVER TIME

Each scene should include minor victories and major obstacles along the way, hindering your hero.

## ANTICIPATION ELICITS EMOTION

Suspense is merely one form of tension. Its effectiveness lies in knowing either more or less than the protagonist—and wondering how events will unfold.

Twists both deflate tension (by answering key questions) and raise it (by introducing new ones).



**Types of external conflict:** man versus nature, legal, cultural, religious, economic, societal, crossed allegiances, and disability and injury.

**Internal:** fear, self-loathing, mistrust, hurt, trauma, apathy, prejudice, doubt, obsession—and unreliability as a narrator.

The catch is that neither matters **until your character cares** about the conflict and seeks change.

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**DON'T FORGET:** Memoirs and narrative nonfiction need tension too, much like in fiction.

If conflict is a hero hanging from a severed rope, tension is the moment before it fails.

If conflict is a cheating spouse, the tension lies in the suspicion and the hunt.