



Word
by
Word

*1,545 words
that amp up
TENSION*

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Tension is part curiosity, part unease, part dread or anticipation. It's linked to every aspect of stories, found on every page, and creates a vivid fictional world that seethes with trouble. Tension prickles readers' nerves and makes them fret and worry. Tension, along with suspense, jabs at the reader's senses with haunting questions and shifting circumstances that must be unraveled. Tension is a crucial ingredient that compels readers to keep turning the pages

It's also force field in fiction or any type of storytelling, created on a word-by-word basis and underlying every scene. It's also used to create mood and tone, important aspects of storytelling often not given their due.

You see, fiction is designed to cause a reader's emotions to jangle and his or her mood to go up and down with every turn of the page. Unlike real life where people usually avoid conflict and misery, in fiction, the best parts of the story are where the characters are in the worst trouble. Readers love to suffer along with characters, because they're removed from these miseries, perhaps because they're escaping their *own* miseries while comfortable in their homes or airplane seats as characters battle doubts and demons in fictional world.

There are many techniques for maintaining and increasing tension in writing fiction and narrative nonfiction. They include foreshadowing, time running out, upping the stakes and motivation,

One a scene-by-scene level whenever possible feature your protagonist somehow uncomfortable even if he is hot, thirsty, tired, or cramped in a ----

A simple technique to ensure tension on every page is via language. Words that suggest mood, menace, movement. Words that are percussive and emphatic.

Word use to increase tension and impact:

- Recognize that you're constantly making choices when you write. Know when you want your words to emphasize, resonate, slow down, or speed up.
- Vary your word choices and respect 'word territory'—that is, don't repeat words and phrases, especially those in close proximity, especially with unusual words.
- Avoid weak adverbs and instead use potent verbs. Verbs are punchy, precise, and energizing.

- Vary sentence lengths because the same repeated sentence length can be numbing when repeated.
- Every word in every sentence needs a job to do. If it doesn't have a job, fire it.
- Short words also help create tension as in *cruel, edgy, blood, blow, numb, gloat, grip, grasp, twist, bash*
- Use 'picturable' words: *apple, basket, knot, monkey, church, hammer, umbrella, tooth, rat, plow, door, sheep, shoe*
- Use incomplete sentences in dialogue. A character can be interrupted or cut off or can lose his way while speaking.
- Use hard consonants such as *claws* instead of *talons, nails* or *paws* because *claws* are more dangerous. The hard *k* or *g* sounds often express pain or menace as in *kill, castrate, crush, crunch, con, connive, gripe, gall, grate, grind, crack, kick, and kickback*. And menace is what tension is all about.
- Use sibilance or a hissing sound to disturb readers, suggest unpleasantness: *sinister, shyster, sizzle, simper, slice, buzz*.
- Insert punchy, muscular verbs whenever they serve your purpose: *roil, blurt, thunder, sting, crash, grovel, conjure, hobble, jacked, leer, muzzle*.
- Always exploit the *sound* of your words—for sound can communicate a tension all its own. Collect a vocabulary of tense sounds to shatter your reader's nerves. Use sharp, scary noises—sound sets off emotional responses wired into our primal brain regions. *Shriek, screech, scream, wail, keen, skitter, hack, clatter, clamor*
- Write tight. Short, choppy sentences with active verbs signal tension. Think of the text mirroring your protagonist's racing heart or whatever the moment requires. Long, meandering sentences filled with adjectives and adverbs imply a relaxed pace. Varying the format of the text will shoot tension into key moments of each scene.
- On the other hand, long sentences can emulate a sort of runaway effect or things/tension piling on.

- Most of the time dialogue should be zingy, taut, and to the point. Exceptions might be an interview or forensic/courtroom testimony.
- While sometimes in dialogue it's okay to describe a character's voice such as sharp or raspy, in dialogue exchanges use precise word choices, body language and gestures instead of adverbs describing the speaker's tone.
- Use words with onomatopoeia –words that sound like what they mean. Dr. Seuss books are famous for using these mimes (Mr. Brown Can Moo Can You), but it's also a sophisticated device. While these words add emphasis and verve, don't overlook their use for adding or underlining tension. Here are just a few that might work: shriek, cackle, moan, hiss, murmur, slap, slur, grunt, pain, wound, glint, whine, blare, bleat, creak, thrum.
- Place the most emphatic words at the end of a sentence or paragraph: The door closed with a resounding click, confirming that I was trapped.

All writing begins with word choice; and word choices will either doom it or set your story apart. I hope this list can add more tension to your story and boost your writing vocabulary.

The List

unnerved
shuttered
sagged
rictus
sparse
tedium
wraith
darkling
bloodless
rash/rashly
brandish
shirk
plight
dilapidated
irrational
tremble
wretch
wretched
stumble
trudge
cackle
vampiric
stamp
lag
connive
slay/slayer
kidnap
caterwaul
whir
yap
grating
drip
squawk
grind/grinding
pierce
piercing

blind
blinding
squeeze
grovel
scar
scarred
scarring
ach, aching, achingly
bleak
wither/withered
quake
murmur
obliterate
endless
spineless
swarm
razor-toothed
delirium
mutiny (v)
gnarled
pyre
stub
churn
bury
pox
quiver
implode
explode
lone
lonely
alone
backfire
mute
stubborn
ominous
crave
scorch

janky
scorched/scorching
strain
wary
soulless
spoil/spoiler
undead
terrorize
ration
drab
plague
evacuate
debris
overrun
hook (v)
otherworldly
swamp
slack/slacken
garbled
tightrope
rob
corpse
clamp
cauterize
panicked
drain (v)
rough
wicked
probe
intrigue
saturate
foe
dire
poke
foil
illegal
crime

law
flood
mean
swipe
hard/harden
hunt
slice
lair
hard scrabble
crash
kill order
untamed
frail
rangy
scalpel
half-mad
mad
maddening
addled
drool
pressure
clamber
epidemic
pucker/puckered
ignite
spike/spiky
din
ropy
pressure
aftermath
discarded
bleed/bleeding
bleeding out
voracious
squabble
interrogation
jarring

forbidden
shame
shameless
culpable
nefarious
yell/yelled
castrate/castration
desolate
shard
yank
unjust
gore
morbid
dungeon
autopsy
expose
rot
rotten
wrench (verb)
shudder
howl
howling
singe
shroud
shrouded
blame
reek
reeking
orgy
triage
slather
scuttle
hostile/hostility
ratchet
venom/venomous
callow
callous

slur
toxic
punch
flash
blow (n)
exploit
exploitation
skeleton
skeletal
inscrutable
fever
fevered
feverish
fever pitch
staccato
chaos
coerce
incantation
lament
scud, scudded
leer
flail
greasy
graveyard
gravesite

twist
uncertain/uncertainty
lurch
weapon
mutter
dart
dust
jittering
slaver
throttle
morph

matted
abhor
abhorrent
sociopath
psychopath
gloaming
piston (v)
apocalypse
hell/hellish
hell bent
gust
cautionary
steal
wince
butcher
butchery
deadly
scrag
gaunt
gimp/gimpy
creep/creepy
leach
unmoored
pant
shuffled
storm cloud
scratch
drill
jabber
ditch
gag
despot
unease
stall
impale
twitch
berserk

dismal
dismally
denounce
menace
clammy
taboo
stoke
mongrel
philanderer
vapid
subversive
snuff
ransack
pillage
covert
scavenge
pacing
numb
eerie/eerily
elbow (v)
rile
brazen
trapped
strapped
perverse
perversity
ghoul
ghoulish
dirge
dupe
ignorant
ghastly
litter/littered
morgue
sorcery
emaciated
brittle

intimidate
lecherous
lecher
crossfire
gruesome
splotch
murder
murderer
grub (v)
crowbar (v)
hiss
yawp
swamp
swampy
shape shift
frozen
nightmare
nightmarish
hoary
abandon
abandonment
intense
purgatorial
nettled
scabrous
bloat/bloated
snarl
crass
cult
fraud
unsure
bruise
bruised
squall
jackal
snatch
stingy

snare
outcast
cobwebbed
glum
sullen
cornered
sweltering
hunched
fume
plead
rootless
stoop
oily
bombshell
ragged
hulking
flinty
shield
endure
conspiracy
blanch
cratered
stun
stunned
scabby
gripe
dominate
complacent
poor
stupor
deadbeat
rickety
surrender
fret
skull
slap
fester

haunt/haunted
heartless
rave
vanish
banish
craven
skid
yelp
beat/beating
rumblings
gnaw
knife-sharp
demise
hoot
shriek
quash
hobble/hobbled
stagger
fraudulent
grizzled
pallid
besmirch
kidnap
shake/shaken
mortuary
bawl
lunge
bullet
kick
mottled
press
jack (v)
stubble
scratch
trespass
trespasser
queasy

trigger
snot
turbulent
knife (v)
incessantly
stung
confuse
hose (v)
anarchy
sopping
scab
grip
elusive
heave
puny
wallop
numbing
hurl
jolt
engulf
freeze
lure
beaten
sick
squander
ambush
ruin
bait
evil
attack
bleat
drench
sweat
bat (v)
stink
stench
utter

needle
scramble
ensnare
fury
coup
liar
lie
satanic
blaze/blazing
frenzy/frenzied
tumult
tumultuous
misstep
beholden
wild/wilds
wilding
drunk
binge
blunder
wail
outlier
grumble
weathered
secret/secretive
smother
axe (v)
hovel
crumple
cringe
plummet
rattle
rattled
shiver
disquieting
rout
hollow
vengeful

abuse
abusive
storm trooper
mercenary
awry
harrowing
helpless
harass/harasser
profane
avarice
stab
tentacle
crude
fracture
victim
victimize
prey
cram
strange
stranger
escape
shoulder (v)
sexy
overreach
slick
traitor
traitorous
chasten
mutate
mutation
lewd
ire
rogue
vigilante
henchmen
encroach
tunnel

sidestep
flee
trickster
insidious
ooze
blindsided
slaughter
destroyer
bones
dodge
bombard
batter
battered
batterer
bloodstain
bloodstained
thrust
horde
squeal
captor
prisoner
cacophony
gravelly
bail
cobble
groan
canker
rust
mold
smash
chomp
blade
bulge
bulging
shove
cancer
hem (v)

shovel (v)
facedown
wedge
acid
blousy
rout
stain
sacrifice
storm (v)
unkempt
rant
horror
mewl
deafening
plop/plopped
addict
addictive
belittle
threat
threaten
threatening
assassin
urgent/urgency
hide/hid/hidden
feud
judder
fright
frighten
sinister
trash
veer
whip
plot
cloying
wean
hardcore
sharp

devastating
mumble
wheeze
bust
bustle
scum
slink
slog
scour
deluge
blast
trample
paltry
squirm
crooked
zigzag
smack
husk
thrash
skewer
lumber
shrill
shill
snort
blur
blurry
blurringly
wrestle
blubber
incompetent
watchful
doom
careen
pervade
drone
fiend
fiendish

sneer
savage
savagery
hoard
embalm
wrinkle
crush
slippery
lash
woe
chase
collapse
tiptoe
nudge
jostle
scrap
scrounge
scourge
funereal
feud
raw
bony
protrude
claw (v)
strangle
lean
ruse
blare
squalid
cripple (v)
shatter
shattered
squelch
whore
churl
meager
frosty

pitiable
drubbing
wend
wending
grave
lance (v)
coffin
invisible
gyrate
fey
war
warring
choppy
life blood
bloodthirsty
limp
limply
unholy
chill (v)
grab
scatter
heat
scare/scared
scary
blurt
tear (v)
thorny
sting
stinging
gobble
gulp
bloodshed
devour
suck
killer
regress
brutal/brutalize

avenge
revenge
puissant
hangover
awkward
alien
friction
troll
sigh
whack
worm (v)
grapple
gasp
gurgle
sizzle/sizzling
tainted
curse
cursed
manic
maniacal
ruthless
survivor
weak
jittery
charge
struggle
gimmick
molest
molester
beg
blood/bloody
bloodied
terse
dread
jostle
spawn
avalanche

blink
wolf (v)
werewolf
rude
whisper
falter/faltered
gunpoint
stake
impose
off-balance
betray
betrayal
hungry
hunger
weary
inoculate
pungent
invade
invasive
invaders
rabid
leaden
steamy/steaming
backlash
stalk
stalker
beefy
infect
infected
sour/soured
phantom
darkness
corpulent
roil/roiling
writhe/writhing
goblin
poison

cruel/cruelty
atrocious
binge
boil
boiling
jeer
cataract
icy
ugly
suffer
suffering
bitter
bile
freak
hunker
sucker
jaundiced
bloodbath
cramp
drone
keen (verb)
flounce
witchcraft
shamble
bewitch
strut
devil
edge (v)
edgy
bristle
bristly
chilling
rage
grate
trouble
troubling
mystery

choke
sludge
shadow
shadowy
overshadowed
sneak
sneaky
deafening
moan
fiery
firestorm
gut (v)
guttled
foul
foulness
shunt
flounder
huddled
bungle
mourn/mournful
bloodlust
unknowable
ghost
recoil
heartbeat
shadiness
bribe
bribery
punish
punishing
punishingly
ghostly
feral
botch
botched
frigid
rooted

spray
phony
rape
rapist
clout
raucous
baleful
bedevil
loner
arid
loser
scarce
ratty
grim
gory
snakelike
rattlesnake
snake (v)
suspicious
flick
force-feed
broke
broken
spit
shell shock
shock/shocked
shocking
ringleader
shackle
jerk
noxious
colorless
thud
pant
flummox
reap
blunt

bluntly
miscarriage
maggot
squint
ninja
incantation
rumble
blanch
unleash
rocketed
jagged
drugged
retch
slump
wrath
squash
perjury
attacker
crumble
barbed
grotesque
prickle
prickly
starve
starving
starveling
dementing
rampant
bark
scold
stump (v)
decomposed
unruly
stale
scald
scalding
doughy

splinter
splintered
blind
broiling
stagnant
flush
suffocating
parch/parched
vicious
nag/nagging
sloppy
hostage
unearned
searing
brood/brooding
roar
froth
frothing
stuff (v)
stash (v)
bluff
seethe
maelstrom
scrabble
disappear
vice
taut
weep
scream
lumpy
seize
sever
severed
transfix
transfixed
tantalizing
avid

alluring
inexplicable
stammer
glassy
scrape
slosh
grisly
soil (v)
peril
spoil
spoiler
fuse (v)
bone-chilling
spine-chilling
warrior
stronghold
thunder (v)
scrimp
bone deep
bone white
bleached
volcanic
invade
sap (v)
barbarous
buckle (v)
pirate
wilderness
goblin
raid
plow
stomp
paranoid
descent
underbelly
lurk/lurking
tangled

blob
restraint
jackhammer
freaked out
freak show
undertow
cold
cold eyed
danger/dangerous
unshakeable
monster
monstrous
seep
soot/sooty
killer
screech
sloth
slothful
devastated
shrug
ravage
hopeless
totter/tottering
ageless
grit, gritty
muscled
violate
wraith
shred/shredded
grief, grieve, grieving
harsh
hurdle
scandal
scandalous
scandalize
criticize
dwindle

darkness
powerless
droop
sputter
assault
hot/hotter/hotly
slash
slasher
gouge
rebel
loom
looming
loot
trail (v)
drive
slam
duck (v)
flatten
rasp, rasping
snag
burst
force (v)
scrape
bolt
disaster
tremor
blazing
jibber
drone
hack
drag
burn
spasm
lunge
burden
simper
vandal

wanton
cadaver
reckless
pander
dull/dulled
dullard
melee
sunder
abrade
merciless
nerves, nervous
crank
void
thump
hammer
weasel (v)
spoil
jelly-legged
spy (v)
bellow
massacre
mutant
half-breed
relentless
empty
grift
grifter
pounce
booty
jam
veer
rebel
pain/painful
painstaking
slum
deserter
manipulate

catharsis
grope
ravenous
echo/echoing
tick
wreck/wrecked
dump
Dumpster
disturbing
brink
sniper
bite
ricochet
snap/snapped
pulp
weird
wound/wounded
insane
clumsy
unwieldy
stark
deny
scoff
harass/harassment
despise
despicable
obscene
anxious/anxiety
thwart
beast/beastly
hardcore
stifle
rend
guillotine (v)
sot
unwitting
tight

spell
thrill
corrupt
corruption
execute/execution
cower
reject
bloodsucking
grievance
demon/demonic
slave
enslave
enslavement
vacant
diminish
macabre
lethal
lurid
goose bumps
sycophant
marauder
bloodthirsty
barbarian
judder
whiplash
tight
riven
changeless
siege
heresy
casket
heist
pepper (v)
crawl
pelt (v)
gnash
rip

crack
craggy
crazy
crazed
clench
fail
failure
whipsaw (v)
harried
whimper
steely
cling/clinging
tang
wronged
maw
siren
plunder
gross
babble
flinch
whine
racket
estranged
gravely
grueling
feeble
scorn
scornful
sycophant
gunmetal
convulse
convulsed
heresy
tread, trod
balk
sprawl
blight

disarm
disarmed
retreat
cornered
crouch
shotgun
smear
manhunt
consequences
trauma
sorrow
sorrowful
vulgar
vulgarity
witless
unseen
thug
thirst
witness
treachery
treacherous
sob
convict
convicted
tripwire
gout
iceman
shooter
criminal
underworld
assassination
tawdry
smuggle/smuggler
muffled
stain/stained
tattered
outlaw

gripping
brainwashed
wreckage
blistering
weaken
unsteady/unsteadily
chafe/chafed
damaged
fumble
wasting
hallucination
futile
afflict/afflicted
burial
hushed
sightless
stealth
stealthy
warp
warped
deathly
coiled
swollen
squat
contaminate
fetish
exhaust
exhausted
repellent
seduce
seductive
surreal
deranged
turmoil
blood sport
wakeful
brawl

torment
predator
predatory
desperate
choked
portend
wormy
crawly
pawn
furtive
grudge
grudging
grudgingly
grimace
flog
torpedo (v)
mutilate
besiege
distraught
huff
rankle
growl
snivel
sniveling
drained
fetid
abrasive
bowed
dumpy
sickly
shambling
jaded
guttural
tearful
minion
mangle
remorse

remorseful
captive
anguish
vindictive
slovenly
blackmail
depraved
depravity
vilify
abomination
diabolical
fateful
malicious
vile
spite/spiteful
grasp
swindle
armed
battery
vilify
sabotage
suspect
hoarse
extort
harangue
coarse
silent
silently
/silently
fierce
leech
listless
seamy
demean
carnage
methhead
junkie

alibi
fitful
skittish
waver
wired
troubled
repugnant
extortion
terrorist
spook
loathe
bloodcurdling
atrocity
sadism
sordid
splatter
murky
gloom
gloomy
somber
fatal
malignant
poisonous
veiled
impenetrable
graft
bigoted
deathtrap
ruttid
cancerous
metastasize
elude
assault
abhorrence
grievous
syphilitic
gooseflesh

teeming
melancholy
viper
shun
gimlet-eyed
foreboding
glint
thunderstorm
sadness
graveside
collared
docile
backbreaking
worm-eaten
repulsive
bash
cage
hysterical
lockdown
pockmarked
accuse
accusatory
glare
musty
cheat/cheater
stooped
fixer
bagman
jeopardy
greed/greedy
subservient
subservience
exile
deserted
abandoned
unflinching
unsettling

forbidding
blindfold
unharmed
feign
cagey
blood red
revile
inhuman
pitiless
murderous
charnel
torturous
forlorn
succumb
topple
foreboding
unutterable
fecund
smite
fracas
unravel
famished
slimy
ordeal
malcontent
gash
bumbling
strand
carnal
skeezy

All About Words