

THE CRAFT

No, not the witches craft, but yes I did leave it that way because it's a little funny to me (sleep deprived state, maybe?). Anyway, this document lays out **tips for refining your work, crafting it into something that's a pleasure to read, and hits all the right emotional points.**

Please, *please* only focus on this once you have got the brain-dump down and written your first messy draft, start to finish.

These tips are for *refining* your work, **not for while you're writing the first draft!** It will be much harder to write your draft if you're trying to get all these things in there while you do.

You do not need to use all of these, and you do not have to get them all perfect, but even working with a few at a time will begin to refine your writing skills.

You may also find it beneficial to work through each of the points, one story read-through at a time.

PACE & RHYTHM

1

VARY SENTENCES & PARAGRAPHS

Vary sentence length, action, and quiet moments to control tension. Short sentences = tension. Mix in a few longer ones to slow it down and build suspense. Paragraphs don't have to be perfect chunks of grammar. Break them to match the pacing. Leaving a single word on its own line can have a chilling effect.

2

BUILDING TENSION

Tension = what keeps readers flipping pages. Threats, uncertainty, secrets, and small details work wonders. Hint at danger before it hits. Make readers feel like they see what your character feels.

Example:

"The lights flickered. Just once. But it was enough. She didn't know if it was a power cut... or something else."

READER ENGAGEMENT

1

SHOW, DON'T TELL

Instead of telling readers what a character feels, show it through action, dialogue, and detail. Makes tension and emotion feel real.

Example (telling):

“She was terrified.”

Showing:

“Her hands shook. She pressed herself against the wall, listening for the slightest sound.”

2

USE STRONG VERBS

Filler words like *just*, *really*, *very*, *actually* often sneak into sentences and make your writing weaker. Swap weak verbs + adverbs for a single vivid verb.

Example:

Weak: “She ran very quickly down the stairs.”

Strong: “She bolted down the stairs.”

READER ENGAGEMENT

3

USE SENSORY DETAILS

Thrillers work best when readers feel the scene. Sight, sound, touch, and smell all make tension visceral.

Example:

“The floorboards groaned under her weight. A cold draft brushed her neck. Somewhere above, water dripped, slow and deliberate.”

4

ANCHOR THE READER

Even in chaos, give small details to orient the reader: where the character is, what they can see/hear/smell. Without it, tension can become confusing rather than scary.

Example:

“She crawled along the basement floor, brushing against damp boxes and shattered glass.”

CHARACTER CONNECTION

1

MAKE THE READER CARE

Give your characters wants, fears, quirks. If we care about them, their danger matters. Even a small, relatable trait works.

Example:

“Tom hated spiders. He’d scream like a kid if one touched him. But now, here he was, crawling through the subfloor, knowing those eight legged freaks were just inches from his head.”

2

AVOID FILTERING CHARACTER EXPERIENCES

Filter words like *felt*, *noticed*, *realised*, and *thought* create distance between the reader and the character. Often, you can show the experience directly instead.

Example with filter:

“She felt afraid as she noticed the shadows moving across the wall.”

Example without filter:

“Shadows moved across the wall. Her stomach twisted as one began to take form.”

CHARACTER CONNECTION

3

INNER THOUGHTS = TENSION AMPLIFIER

Let readers peek inside the character's head, into their doubts, fears, or paranoia. This can happen through direct quotes of their inner monologue, or as part of the narration.

Example:

"Her heart hammered at the sound. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was everything."

GIVE ME STAKES!

1 KEEP STAKES CLEAR

Remind the reader what's at risk. Life, freedom, sanity, or reputation: stakes make tension matter.

Example:

"If she didn't get out before sunrise, she wouldn't ever be getting out again."

2 FORESHADOWING & RED HERRINGS

Drop hints early to build suspense or misdirect the reader. Make them second-guess themselves.

Example:

"He noticed the lock on the back door was slightly scratched... probably nothing. Or maybe something."

3 USE MINI-CLIFFHANGERS

End a scene or paragraph with a question, threat, or surprise. Makes readers need to know what the next sentence is. This is where those single words on a line can have great impact.

Example:

"She reached for the doorknob. And froze."

DIALOGUE

1

WRITING DIALOGUE

Make it natural. People talk in fragments, run-ons, and interruptions. Say it out loud. Let grammar slide a little. Dialogue is a great way to reveal character and drop tension. If characters are panicked, they won't speak in long, perfect sentences.

Example:

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"I—I don't know. Upstairs. I swear I—"

"You're imagining things."

"No! I'm not!"

Note: It's generally recommended to not place more than three lines of dialogue without showing who is speaking, as it can become difficult for the reader to remember who is saying what. This example is just to show the imperfect, broken sentences.

DIALOGUE

2

USE ACTION TAGS VS. SPEECH TAGS

A speech tag is the standard “he said / she asked.” An action tag replaces or strengthens a speech tag with what the character is doing, showing emotion or movement.

Example speech tag:

“Hurry up!” she said.

Example action tag:

She slammed her hand against the doorframe. “Hurry up!”

Or, you could mix both:

She slammed her hand against the doorframe. “Hurry up!” she hissed.

Phew! That’s a lot! Remember this is all for your editing stage, *after* you’ve written your draft. This is about *polishing* and *refining* your work, to make the reading experience visceral and emotionally engaging.

Now, have fun shaping your work, however many times you’re willing to read back over it!