

Suspense

Can you think of a novel that you have read into the wee hours of the night because you simply couldn't put it down? That is the power of suspense!! The reader is left hanging and needs to read on in order to figure out what happens to the character! Building suspense into writing allows the author to give the reader a hint as to what is to come! The author shares a little bit at a time allowing the reader to wonder or worry what will happen next in the story. This sense of anticipation hooks the reader and moves a story forward into the main event. In grade 5, students focus on three main techniques in order to learn the art of adding suspense to writing!

Story Questions: One way we teach suspense is through story questions. The simplest way to do that is to have the main character raise a story question like; What in the world is happening to my bike? What was that sound in the woods? Did I really just see what I think I did?

Word Referents: Another technique to teach suspense is word referents. A word referent is a description of a character or an object without naming it. For instance: The creature stood on its hind legs and growled. It lumbered closer and closer to me. I felt its hot breath on my face and was frozen with fear. The fish eater reached out a giant paw and that was when I turned and ran.

Notice the author did not have to tell you it was a bear, but rather was able to describe it without naming it thereby creating a sense of anticipation in the story!

The Magic of Three: The final technique we use to teach suspense is The Magic of Three. This technique involves using a series of three sensory hints to build tension- the third hint leads to a revelation. For example: Just then I saw large footprints in the snow and anxiously looked all around me. Nothing else was unusual so I kept walking. Suddenly from out of nowhere a strange noise sounded very close to where I was standing. My heart pounded in my chest and I stood frozen to the spot. Without warning a trembling began to shake the trees around me and when I looked up I was standing in front of a snow monster.

When building suspense, especially the Magic of Three, authors use red flag words and phrases. These include words such as; suddenly, without warning, in the blink of an eye, instantly, a moment later.

Read the student samples below to see examples of how writers embed suspense into their writing. As reflected in our Narrative Writing Rubric, these samples skillfully provide a sense of anticipation while encouraging the reader to worry or wonder what is going to happen through the use of red flag words, story questions, or the magic of three, allowing the story to develop slowly as the reader is drawn into the event!

I peered down the stairs. I heard the crinkle of paper and the sticky sound of tape being pulled off the roll. My mother was kneeling near the Christmas tree, smiling as she unrolled the gift wrap. I worried that she would see me. My heart began to race with excitement as I caught sight of the box in her hands! "Could it really be for me?" I wondered, "The one thing I had wished and hoped for?" I couldn't wait for Christmas morning!

Zach and I walked along the path through the zoo and stopped short. He stared into the habitat in front of him. The creature was absolutely beautiful! Its long neck extended to the treetops and its small mouth pulled at the leaves. This graceful beast glanced down at us with large, soulful, dark eyes. We were amazed at her four long, stilt-like legs. This incredible animal's coat was speckled in shades of gold and brown, like sunshine through the trees. Zach looked at the nameplate posted on the fence and whispered to me, "Giraffe".

I strolled along the lonely beach. Just then a strange splash in the water caught my eye. I turned toward the water and peered into the waves. There was no sign of whatever it was splashing out there. I shrugged my shoulders and kept walking on the shore. Suddenly I heard the most unusual sound. Again, I stopped and tried to figure out what in the world was making that sound. All was still, except for the sound of the waves. I shook my head- it didn't make sense. I walked closer to the water, trying to figure out what was out there. Without warning, something huge and shiny seemed to leap out of the water. I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand. I couldn't believe my eyes, it was a huge whale!