



Word
by
Word

*1130 words
that amp up
TENSION*

JESSICA P
MORRELL

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 a 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 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.

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.
- Vary sentence lengths because they can be numbing when repeated.
- Write tight. Short sentences generally increase tension. Every word in every sentence needs a job. If it doesn't have a job, fire it.
- Use hard consonant sounds: (cowgirl, geek, gimme, trigger, castrate, succor, cackle.
- 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.

- Most of the time dialogue should be zingy, taut, and to the point.
- 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 stories begin 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.

All About Words

shattered
sagged
sparse
wraith
darkling
bloodless
rash/rashly
irrational
tremble
wretched
stumble
trudge
cackle
vampiric
stamp
lag
connive
slay/slayer
kidnap
whir
yap
grating
drip
grind/grinding
piercing
blind/blinding
squeeze
grovel
scar/scarred
ach, aching, achingly
bleak
wither/withered
quake
murmur
endless
pyre
stub
churn
bury
pox
quiver
implode
explode
lone

lonely
alone
backfire
mute
stubborn
flop
crave
scorch
strain
wary
soulless
spoil/spoiler
undead
terrorize
ration
drab
plague
evacuate
debris
overrun
hook (v)
far-flung
swamp
slack/slacken
goop
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
frail
rangy
scalpel
half-mad
mad
maddening
addled
drool
pressure
clamber
epidemic
pucker/puckered
rare
spike/spiky
din
ropy
pressure
aftermath
discarded
bleed/bleeding/bleeding
out
voracious
jarring
forbidden
shame/shameless
culpable
nefarious
yell/yelled
castrate/castration
shard
yank
unjustly
gore
deport
autopsy
expose
rot, rotting
wrench (verb)
shudder, shuddering
howl/howling
sing
shroud

blame
reek
orgy
triage
slather
scuttle
hostile
ratchet
venom/venomous
callow
callous
slur
toxic
punch
flash
blow (n)
exploit
fever/fevered/feverish
staccato
chaos
coerce
incantation
lament
scud, scudded
leer
flail
greasy
twist
uncertain/uncertainty
lurch
weapon
mutter
dart
dust
jittering
slaver
throttle
morph
matted
abhorrent
sociopath
psychopath
gloaming
piston (v)
apocalypse
hell/hellish
hell bent
gust

cautionary
steal
wince
gaunt
gimp/gimpy
creep
leach
unmoored
pant
shuffle
storm cloud
scratch
drill
jabber
ditch
gag
despot
stall
impale
denounce
watered-down
pacing
numb
eerie
elbow (v)
rile
brazen
maw
strapped
perverse
dirge
dupe
ignorant
litter/littered
morgue
sorcery
emaciated
brittle
lose
lecherous
lecher
crossfire
gruesome
splotch
murder
murderer
grub (v)
crowbar (v)

hiss
swamp
shape shift
frozen
nightmare
hoary
abandon/abandonment
intense
purgatorial
nettled
scabrous
bloat/bloated
snarl
crass
cult
fraud
unsure
bruise/bruised
rotten
jackal
snatch
stingy
snare
outcast
cobwebbed
glum
sullen
cornered
sweltering
hobble
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
demise
hoot
shriek
quash
hobbled
stagger
gloom
grizzled
pallid
besmirch
kidnap
shake/shaken
mortuary
bawl
lunge
bullet
kick
mottled
press
jack (v)
stubble
scratch
trespass/trespasser
queasy
trigger
snot
turbulent

knifed
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
crumple
cringe
plummet
rattle/rattled
shiver/shivering
disquieting
rout
hollow
vengeful
abuse/abusive
storm trooper
mercenary
awry
harrowing
helpless
harass/harasser
profane
avarice
stab
tentacle
crude
crud
victim
prey
cram
strange
stranger
predator
escape
shoulder (v)
sexy
overreach
slick
traitor/traitorous
chasten
mutate/mutation

ire
rogue
vigilante
henchmen
encroach
tunnel
sidestep
flee
trickster
insidious
ooze
blindsided
slaughter
destroyer
bones
dodge
bombard
batter/battered
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
cursed
threaten/threatening
assassin
urgent/urgency
hide/hid/hidden
feud
judder
fright
frighten
sinister
trash
veer
whip
plot
cloying
wean
hardcore
sharp
devastating
mumble
wheeze
hulking
bust
bustle
scum
slink
scour
deluge
blast
trample
paltry
squirm
crooked
zigzag
smack
husk
thrash
skewer
lumber
shrill
skill

snort
blur/blurry/blurryingly
wrestle
blubber
incompetent
watchful
doom
careen
pervade
drone
fiend
sneer
savage
hoard
embalm
wrinkle
crush
slippery
lash/lashed
woe
chase
collapse
tiptoe
nudge
jostle
scrap
scrounge
scourge
funereal
feud
raw
bony
protrude
claw, clawing
lean
ruse
blare
squalid
cripple
shatter
squelch
whore
churl
meager
frosty
pitiable
drubbing
wend/wending

grave
coffin
invisible
gyrate
fey
war/warring
choppy
limp
unholy
chill (v)
grab
scatter
heat
scare/scared
scary
blurt
tear (v)
thorny
sting/stinging
gulp
devour
suck
killer
regress
brutal
avenge
revenge
puissant
hangover
awkward
alien
friction
troll
sigh
whack
worms (v)
grapple
gasp
gurgle
sizzle/sizzling
tainted
curse
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
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

darkness
lament
roil/roiling

writhe/writhing
goblin
poison/poisonous
cruel/cruelty
atrocious
binge
boil/boiling
jeer
cataract
icy
ugly
suffer/suffering
bitter
freak
hunker
sucker
lament
bloodbath
cramp
drone
keen (verb)
flounce
witchcraft
shamble
bewitch
strut
devil
edge, edgy
bristle, bristly
chilling
rage
trouble/troubling
mystery
choke
sludge
shadow
sneak, sneaky
deafening
moan
fiery
firestorm
gut (v)/gutted
foul, foulness
flounder

huddled
bungle
mourn/mournful
bloodlust
unknowable
ghost
recoil
heartbeat
shadiness
bribe
punish/punishing
ghostly
feral
fume
frigid
rooted
spray
phony
rape
rapist
pelting
raucous
baleful
bedevil
loner
loser
scarce
ratty
grim
gory
rattlesnake
snake (v)
suspicious
flick
force-feed
broke/broken
spit
shell shock
ringleader
shackle
jerk
colorless
thud
pant

flummox
reap
blunt
miscarriage
squint
ninja
incantation
rumble
blanch
unleash
rocketed
jagged
drugged
retch
slump
wrath
squash
perjury
attacker
crumble
barbed
grotesque
prickle
prickly
starve/starving
rampant
bark
scold
stump (v)
decomposed
unruly
stale
scald/scalding
doughy
splintered
blind
broiling
stagnant
flush
suffocating
parch/parched
vicious
nag/nagging
sloppy

hostage
unearned
searing
brood
roar
frothing
stuff (v)
stash (v)
bluff
seethe
maelstrom
scrabble
disappear
vice
taut
weep
scream
lumpy
sever/severed
transfix/transfixed
tantalizing
avid
alluring
inexplicable
stammer
glassy
scrape
slosh
grisly
soil (v)
peril
spoil/spoiler
fuse (v)
bone-chilling
warrior
stronghold
thunder (v)
scrimp
invade
sap (v)
barbarous
buckle (v)
pirate
wilderness
goblin
raid
plow

stomp
paranoid
descent
underbelly
lurk
tangled
blob
restraint
jackhammer
freaked out
freak show
undertow
cold
danger/dangerous
unshakeable
monster
monstrous
seep
soot/sooty
killer
screch
sloth
devastated
shrug
ravage
hopeless
totter/tottering
ageless
grit, gritty
muscled
violate
wraith
shred/shredded
grief, grieve, grieving
harsh
hurdle
scandal/scandalous
criticize
dwindle
darkness
powerless
droop
sputter
assault
hot/hotter/hotly
slash
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
bellow
massacre
mutant

half-breed
relentless
empty
grift/grafter
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
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
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
pepper (v)
crawl
pelt (v)
gnash
rip
crack
fail/failure
crazy/crazies
harried
whimper
acrid
cling/clinging
tang
wronged
maw
plunder

feeble
scorn
sycophant
scandal
convulse
heresy
tread, trod
balk
sprawl
blight
disarm/disarmed
retreat
cornered
crouch
shotgun
consequences
trauma
sorrow/sorrowful
vulgar/vulgarity
witless
unseen
thug
thirst
witness