Hook Your Readers With Tension
By Laura Backes, Write4Kids.com

Tension. Without it, life would be--let's face it--boring. So would fiction. Tension works with conflict to raise the emotional level of the text to a boiling point. It forces the reader to become invested in the story. But many children's book writers are afraid to apply too much tension to their plots. They think kids can't handle it. Think again.

"Tension" is a loaded word, and can be misleading. A better way of thinking about tension might be to constantly raise the stakes for your character, so she has to work to get what she wants. In her book "Dynamic Characters: How to Create Personalities That Keep Readers Captivated," Nancy Kress says, "Fiction...demands a pattern of mounting tension. Thus, if you are shaping real-life events into fiction, you must rearrange them into the kind of pattern...that puts ever increasing pressure on your protagonist."

Tension is what hooks readers of any age and keeps them turning the pages. Authors employ many methods of increasing the pressure on their characters. Here are a few you can try:

* The ticking clock. A time limit presents automatic pressure. If your character has to reach her goal by a certain time, or assent to failure, the stakes are raised from the beginning of the story. If you then place unforeseen obstacles in your character's way, all the better. The clock can provide mental tension (it's a personal goal for your character to accomplish something within a designated time period), emotional tension (the character will suffer embarrassment or shame if the task is not completed on time), or impending danger (harm will come to the character or someone he cares about when the time is up).

* Dialogue. The way you craft conversations between characters can effectively elevate the tension in subtle or overt ways. If your protagonist wants something from the other character but doesn't want that character to know, tension underlies the seemingly innocent conversation. Another character may want information from your protagonist, who sidesteps the issue. Or, the dialogue can be openly confrontational. In any case, the exchange pushes the story to the next plot point.

* Pacing. Well written fiction has ebbs and flows to the pacing of the story. Each time your character hits a crisis point, the pacing speeds up. Once that crisis is solved, the story can take on a more leisurely pace, giving your protagonist (and the reader) a brief break. But soon another crisis presents itself, this one greater than that last. The "ebbs" get shorter as the plot speeds up, finally culminating in the climax. Your reader anticipates these peaks in the tension, and is pulled through the story.
* Sentence structure. Short, choppy sentences with active verbs signal tension. Think of the text mirroring your protagonist's racing heart. 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.

Each story requires a different kind of tension. Gentle picture books for young readers might simply put an obstacle in the character's path that needs to be overcome by the end of the book. The tension could come from the protagonist's humorous missteps as she reaches her goal. The stakes are much higher in young adult novels, in which the tension may come from life-changing situations. But tension, in whatever form, must be present for a book to sell in today's competitive market. And besides, tension makes the story more fun to read...and to write.

Laura Backes is the author of "Best Books for Kids Who (Think They) Hate to Read" from Prima/Random House. She's also the publisher of Children's Book Insider, the Newsletter for Children's Writers. For more information about writing children's books, including free articles, market tips, insider secrets and much more, visit Children's Book Insider's home on the web at http://write4kids.com

Copyright 2002, Children's Book Insider, LLC