

Seven Secrets of Romantic Suspense

By Lisa Gardner

Writing romantic suspense is tough. You have characters, you have plot. You have beautiful romance elements, you have nail-biting suspense. In short, you have a lot of ingredients and few instructions for preparation. While there is no one winning recipe, here are seven tips to help guide your efforts:

1. **Start in the library**
2. **Establish a setting that will add tone and tension**
3. **Create compelling protagonists and worthy opponents**
4. **Reveal your twisting plot slowly, with the stakes high and the end always in doubt**
5. **Exacerbate conflicts and character development with sexual tension**
6. **Tantalize your reader with hints of hope**
7. **Satisfy your reader with a solid ending and sense of closure**

1. Start in the library

The experts weren't lying when they said write what you know and know what you write. In research, there are three levels of exposure:

- Secondary sources: True crime novels, textbooks, periodicals, articles, etc.
- Primary sources: Interviewing doctors, lawyers, agents, cops, etc.
- Hands-on exposure: Gun classes, volunteering at a hospital, morgue, etc.

Every writer must decide for herself how far she wants to take it, but details matter. Patricia Cornwell, Thomas Harris, and Stephen Hunter are just three examples of authors who have rocketed to the top due to the thoroughness of their research. By becoming masters of their subjects, they plunge the reader into a richly textured world, with authentic investigative procedure and clever plot twists. This creates a “big book,” worthy of their seven-digit contracts.

Also, the public has a growing interest in police and forensics details as evidenced by the popularity of such shows as Law & Order, CSI, NYPD Blue, etc. Any new research tidbit you can bring to the table will help garner an editor's interest as well.

2. Establish a setting that will add tone and tension

From the chilling Minnesotan winter used by Tami Hoag in *Night Sins* to the sultry Louisianan summer of Sandra Brown's *Slow Heat in Heaven*, setting makes a book come alive. Plummeting temperatures give a sense of urgency, just as nightfall can evoke fear. A dark English castle may be brooding, while open Montana skies provide opportunity and fresh starts. Also, changing from one location to another can give your book a sense of movement. The bottom line is, whatever setting you ultimately choose, get to know it intimately and make it *real*.

3. Create compelling protagonists and worthy opponents

If there is one element that can make or break a book, character development is it. Romantic suspense is about impending danger and blossoming romance—and none of it is meaningful if we don't care about the characters. Moreover, many beginning writers make the mistake of inventing intelligent, clever protagonists, but then pit them against slow, stupid villains. The match of wits should be even, or your conflict and tension will be contrived. The best suspense books break new ground with their villains. Think Lex Luthor, Hannibal Lector, Cruella de Ville, etc.

Obviously, a whole article could be written on character development. Since we don't have that kind of length, here are a few quick pointers:

- Every character (including the villain) should have a goal and something personal at stake in the emerging conflict. Keep this goal in mind at all times for consistent motivation.
- Every character should have a few key strengths that mold and form them, e.g., the genius, the athlete, the military man. Don't give them too many strengths or they will be unbelievable.
- Every character should have some vulnerability. This will take your characters from cardboard cut outs to being real human beings. In *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris, one of the most riveting scenes is the killer falling in love with a truly wonderful, generous woman. Likewise, the hero's battle with alcohol throughout the book makes him approachable and sympathetic. People are flawed and those flaws make them genuine.
- Every character should have their own moral code, the things they will and will not do. Your heroine will do anything to catch a murderer, but put her child in jeopardy. Your killer suffers from a homicidal rage, but refuses to stoop to theft. Everyone has boundaries and these boundaries should shape your characters in the emerging battle.
- Everyone must evolve. Conflict and love are like fire, breaking down your characters and forging better, stronger people in their place. Cynics learn to love, loners to trust. The heroine and hero impact each other, bend each other, and reshape each other permanently. By the end of the book, they

could not go their separate way and still feel complete. When that happens, you know you've done your job well.

4. Reveal your twisting plot slowly, with the stakes high and the end always in doubt

As the saying goes, the world was made round so we could never see too far ahead. Syd Field's book on screenwriting techniques is still the best plotting advice I know. Basically, start with a bang, build tension, offer a few resting moments, then throw in complication after complication until it appears all is lost. At that moment, your protagonists will refuse to give in, launch their final bold attack, and since this is popular fiction, emerge triumphant.

Creating this kind of high-tension plot is definitely easier said than done. For me, it takes three or four iterations to get a suspense plot right. I outline my first attempt at plot, see all the holes, rewrite the outline, realize the whole thing is trite, throw it out, and start over. Generally after a few cycles of thinking and trashing, I have something I can tolerate. I know other authors who write down seven possible resolutions to the conflict, throw them all out, then go with the eighth—figuring the first seven were the predictable answers so the eighth idea will be the one that truly surprises the reader. Generally, a twisting suspense plot will require you to back fill foreshadowing and relevant details. Remember, if you can see what's going to happen next, so can the reader.

5. Exacerbate conflicts and character development with sexual tension

The Gothics do it best. The brooding man, the mysterious woman. The burning attraction that might finally illuminate their lives or plunge them once and for all into darkness. Sexual tension adds so much to suspense. It contributes to mystery: Is this person friend or foe? It ratchets up the tension, keeping the reader flipping pages until the late hours of the night. It complicates the plot—there's nothing simple about love or lust. Finally, it exposes your characters. Sex makes people vulnerable and in suspense novels, your characters generally can't afford to be vulnerable. They want, they fear, they need. This is potent stuff.

Personally, I like sexual tension to closely track the suspense plot. As danger mounts, so does desire. As the future becomes more and more uncertain, the need for personal connection becomes even more paramount. Ultimately, the characters come together in a tumultuous mix of passion, vulnerability, and hope. This release of physical tension makes a great “breather” for the reader right before the plot suffers a final, dramatic twist.

6. Tantalize your reader with hints of hope

We need to have doubt, we need to have fear. But what keeps conflict high and a reader interested is that distant glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. By definition, a romantic suspense novel is still targeting the romance market. Remember why romance readers read—for escape, for entertainment, and for happily-ever-after. If your book

becomes too hopeless or too negative, you risk losing your reader. As a result, you must seek to modulate tension. Plot twists, escalating tension and harsh setbacks should be followed by fresh ideas and new plans for attack. Your protagonists can feel cornered, afraid, and overwhelmed, but they should never, ever be hopeless.

7. Satisfy your reader with a solid ending and sense of closure

Once again, romance readers require a happy ending and sense of resolution. You have plunged your readers into a fast-paced, muscle-bunching, eye-straining marathon. Now, you need to give them a victory party.

First, end with a bang. Nothing is worse than a book that runs out of steam. Think big, bigger, and biggest. Second, closure matters. You've created a tightly-woven suspense masterpiece, don't let it unravel at the finish line. This may require having a second party read your book to find the holes and question motivation. Finally, pillow talk is important. Your plot is wrapped up, the twists explained, the bad guy defeated. Now give your hero and heroine some time alone. Let them be together, laughing, crying, or loving. Tell the reader how they will continue their lives together, stronger, healthier, and happier. This will provide the final warm glow so that your reader can lean back against the headboard and feel satisfied.