

# How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill

copyright 2011 by steven james / all rights reserved / voice: 800.527.8679  
e-mail: [info@stevenjames.net](mailto:info@stevenjames.net) / web: [www.stevenjames.net](http://www.stevenjames.net) / blog: <http://stvjames.blogspot.com>

## Nine characteristics of the modern thriller

1. A bigger-than-life antagonist - A villain or forces of antagonism that are truly frightening, disturbing, or unsettling. The strength of your protagonist is measured against the strength of the adversaries he must overcome, whether these are natural forces of antagonism, or an antagonist who is a bigger-than-life villain.
2. Relentless escalation
  - An increasing sense of danger to the protagonist or to the protagonist's loved-one.
  - Something will happen to make it personal. Even in a "end-of-the-world" scenario the reader will want it to be personal, so stick Granny in the city that's about to get demolished by aliens.
3. Deep psychological exploration of human nature through the internal struggle of the protagonist or protagonists. Often, several cast characters will have the same struggle from different angles.
  - Rather than work from a theme work from a dilemma. However, if you are working from a theme you will need to refute your theme and then refute the refutation or it will seem like propaganda.
4. Satisfying surprises - There must be a twist that's both unexpected and inevitable. At its essence, a twist is nothing more than turning the logic of the story around and showing the reader that there is a deeper logic, another channel of meaning that he or she hadn't noticed yet.
5. Adequate clues - You must play fair. Unlike with Sherlock Holmes. Foreshadow to remove coincidence, layer in clues to hid them, review them to make the final logic of the detective more believable.
6. Point-of-view flips - The first-person POV is becoming more and more popular, even the present-tense rather than past tense for the story. POV switches are commonly used to increase the suspense. This we have learned from cinema and has become a hallmark of suspense novels.
7. A heroic underdog
  - Often a normal, everyday person is thrown into an extraordinary world and must overcome the odds, rise to the challenge. The biggest challenge—making their transformation believable. Two movies that do a good job with this are *The Fugitive* and *The Hunt for Red October*.
  - In the climactic conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist, the protagonist must be at a disadvantage.
8. Memorable climaxes that push the protagonist to the edge, and then beyond it. Robert McKee talks a lot about the fate worse than death. Think of the worst thing that could happen, then extend that.
9. A mythic or archetypical resurrection - after the final conflict in which there appears to be no chance for the protagonist to survive, we see a form or mythic resurrection so that the protagonist can rise to fight for justice or counter evil once again.

# How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill

copyright 2011 by steven james / all rights reserved / voice: 800.527.8679  
e-mail: [info@stevenjames.net](mailto:info@stevenjames.net) / web: [www.stevenjames.net](http://www.stevenjames.net) / blog: <http://stvjames.blogspot.com>

## Demystifying Suspense

The essence of suspense.

The difference between suspense and conflict.

Why mystery and violence can harm suspense.

The difference between creating dread and sustaining suspense.

## Four essentials for creating suspense

### Reader empathy

Key #1 - Until we know what it as stake we will not be invested in the story.

### Reader concern

Key #2 - We must know what the character wants in order to know what the story is about.

### Impending danger

Key #3 - A promise without fulfillment is not suspense; it is disappointment.

### Escalating tension

Key #4 - Repetition is the enemy of escalation.

# How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill

copyright 2011 by steven james / all rights reserved / voice: 800.527.8679  
e-mail: [info@stevenjames.net](mailto:info@stevenjames.net) / web: [www.stevenjames.net](http://www.stevenjames.net) / blog: <http://stvjames.blogspot.com>

## The Practical Side of Suspense

### Promises and Payoff

#### How to make promises that build reader apprehension

#### How and when to fulfill them

#### How pace and continuity work to enhance suspense

Key - You must always give the reader what he wants or something better.

### Ingredients

Mood

Villains

Honesty

Stakes

Isolation

Continuity

Apprehension

POV flips

Narrative time

Terror

Compression

Subtext

Solutions

Desperation

Perspective

# How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill

copyright 2011 by steven james / all rights reserved / voice: 800.527.8679  
e-mail: info@stevenjames.net / web: www.stevenjames.net / blog: http://stvjames.blogspot.com

## Taking it to the next level

The two simple questions that will solve all of your plotting problems:

Believability

Escalation

### How to create twists that will shock and satisfy readers

1. The story that precedes the twist must stand on its own and not depend on the twist for its meaning, context or value. A twist has to be the icing on the cake and not the icing on the liver.
2. A twist is simply something that's unexpected. If readers see it coming, it's not a twist, it's a disappointment. However, it must also flow logically from what precedes it.
3. Twists drive the story forward as long as they add layers of meaning to the preceding story-line. A twist must cause the reader to rewind the story in their minds and then replay it with the new

information that the twist provides, and find that the story is deeper than they ever imagined.

4. The bigger the twist, the more essential that the story make sense up until that point.

5. A satisfying twist will always be (1) unexpected, (2) inevitable, (3) an escalation of what preceded it, (4) a revelation that adds meaning to what has already occurred.

So here is my mini-hint, my reminder to myself: *Always twist the story forward.*

#### Some movies with twists that work

- o The Uninvited
- o The Book of Eli
- o The Others
- o The Spanish Prisoner
- o The Sixth Sense
- o Prestige
- o Illusionist
- o No Way Out
- o A Few Good Men
- o Drag Me to Hell
- o Saw
- o Seven
- o The Game
- o Following
- o 12 Monkeys
- o Gone Baby, Gone
- o Arlington Road
- o Civic Duty
- o Blood Simple
- o Hard Candy

#### o Matchstick Men

- o Best Laid Plans
- o Frequency
- o 11:14
- o Running Scared
- o Clay Pigeons (first five minutes, best twist beginning ever)
- o Runaway Jury
- o Vanilla Sky
- o Primal Fear

#### Examples of twists that didn't work

- o The Village - because of deescalation at the end. We realize that things weren't really as bad as we thought.
- o Fracture - because everything revolves around a twist that you can see coming a mile away.

# How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill

copyright 2011 by steven james / all rights reserved / voice: 800.527.8679  
e-mail: [info@stevenjames.net](mailto:info@stevenjames.net) / web: [www.stevenjames.net](http://www.stevenjames.net) / blog: <http://stvjames.blogspot.com>

## Twelve Sure-fire Ways to Kill the Suspense of Your Novel

If you think your novel might be a little too intense and you're trying to tone down the thrill-factor to make it appeal to a broader audience, follow these simple, time-tested tips to assure that your reader's heart won't race too much and his knuckles will never turn white.

1. Right when things are really getting thrilling, cut to a different pov or jump to the next scene. Don't worry, this doesn't annoy readers, it keeps them flipping pages. Just because they feel like throwing their Kindle against the wall doesn't mean they're annoyed, it just means they're engaged.
2. Make sure your characters do inexplicable things that cause the reader to scratch his head and think "What? No! He would never do that . . ." or "That doesn't make any sense. Why doesn't he just . . . (shoot the bad guy, call 911, wait for backup to arrive, drive away from the flesh-eating alien in the abandoned pickup truck)?" You get the idea.
3. Start your story with a great hook, like having a prologue in which a woman is running on a beach by herself and there are werewolves on the loose. So guess what happens? Huh? Huh? You're going to love this twist—she gets attacked by them! See? It's fresh, original and has never been done before. And that's what makes a good story.
4. Make sure the bad guy is either so obvious throughout the story that even a junior high kid could guess his identity, or so obscure no one would ever believe it could be him even after you tell us.
5. Never use practical, everyday methods of creating suspense such as (1) adding a deadline or a countdown, (2) having your characters make plans and share them with the reader, (3) show the storm clouds gathering, (4) let readers see the impending danger that the characters do not see. Those are gimmicks and only annoy readers.
6. Keep repeating the same stuff over and over—chase scenes, sex scenes, murders. Readers don't want the promise that something terrible is going to happen in the future, they just want to have exciting things happen *right now*. Avoid the temptation to escalate the tension throughout the story until you reach a thrilling climax.
7. When you use pov flips, make sure that you go back in time or don't take into consideration how much actual narrative time has passed since that character's last pov section.
8. Stick to your outline rather than shape your story organically by continually asking what the reader is thinking, hoping for, wondering about, worrying about or interested in. Who cares if you're not surprised by the direction your story goes in? Readers aren't nearly as smart as you. They'll never guess.
9. Make evil alluring and attractive rather than disturbing. The last thing you would want is for a reader to actually be terrified by the dark side of his own human nature. Better to just give us caricatures of evil than letting us identify with the real thing inside of ourselves.
10. As far as characterization, don't let your protagonist show much emotion. Readers like tough guys! So, don't let us see him grief, or get troubled by death, or show too much compassion. Instead, make him coolly objective at crime scenes and emotionally detached to tragedy.
11. Make sure your villain is the hand-wringing, self-congratulatory, chortling "Look what an evil mastermind I am" character. So what if people say he's "cardboard." They just don't understand how to write.
12. Promise that something terrible will happen and then don't let it happen. It'll make for a great twist.

# How to Write Thrillers that Actually Thrill

copyright 2011 by steven james / all rights reserved / voice: 800.527.8679  
e-mail: info@stevenjames.net / web: www.stevenjames.net / blog: http://stvjames.blogspot.com

## Here are some recommended movies and the storytelling principles they exemplify

**Multiple protagonists** - You can always improve your story by having two or more people whom we are both cheering for. But here's the kicker—for one to succeed, the other must fail. This doubles the tension at the center of the story. As you watch these movies, note how the emotional connection with the story is tightened as you desire for the main characters to get what they want.

**Recommended movies:** *The House of Sand and Fog* and *The Fugitive*.

**Scene structure** - Scenes are made stronger when the people involved in them want something but cannot get it. The best scenes are built around two or more people wanting something that brings the people in conflict with each other. The story is then built around the protagonist not getting what he wants. As you watch this movie, note how, in each scene the main character wants something but does not get it.

**Recommended movie:** *Crash* (2004)

**Life-affirming** - I believe that commercially viable fiction should have a redemptive or uplifting or life-affirming ending. That doesn't mean that the story is artificially optimistic, but that it affirms relationships and offers hope.

**Recommended movie:** *Life is Beautiful* and *Up*

**Dialogue** - Typically theatrical plays, since they have to rely on dialogue rather than visuals (like movies) or internal dialogue (like novels) offer the best examples of good dialogue. Studying plays, or films based on plays, will help you shape and hone dialogue. As you watch these movies, don't just note what is said, but more importantly, what is not. That is what drives the deeper meaning of the scene forward.

**Recommended movies:** *Tape* and *Closer*

**Cause and Effect** - Every action in a story must be caused by what precedes it. So when something happens, it must cause another thing and that must cause the next. Note in this movie how the characters "reap what they sow."

**Recommended movie:** *A Simple Plan*

**Unexpected yet inevitable endings** - This is typically what we think of when we talk about a "twist" at the end of a story. Readers want to predict how a story will end, but they want to be wrong, yet still satisfied. As you watch these movies, be aware of what you are expecting to happen, and then how the scenes tilt away from that toward another (hopefully!) believable ending.

**Recommended movies:** *Blood Simple*, *Transsiberian* and *Best Laid Plans*

**Tension from moral dilemmas** - A choice between a good thing and a bad thing is not interesting. A choice between two bad things inevitably involves tension, and that is at the heart of all good stories. So as you watch these two movies, note the many times in which the characters are forced to choose between "the better of two evils."

**Recommended movies:** *Gone Baby, Gone* and *The Dark Knight*