

Tension in the Essay

What drives an essay forward? The answer depends on another question: what drives an essay *for whom*, the reader or the writer? A number of things can motivate a reader or writer to follow trails into a subject, but perhaps one of the best ways to talk about that effect is to focus on *tension*.

Simply put, tension is created by the sense that there are opposing forces in a piece of writing. These may be quite subtle, but they're usually detectable if one looks for them.

Whatever its source or its audience, the tension in a piece of writing, according to Phillip Gerard¹, directly or indirectly tries to answer the question *What is at stake here?* What is at stake for the reader? What is at stake for the writer? What is at stake for the characters? Is there a larger truth that will somehow matter?

Types of Tension

How do we create sufficient tension to sustain a reader's interest in where we want to take him? Of course, tension isn't the only influence on this. For example, readers can live without tension for quite some time if they feel they're in the hands of a capable writer who will eventually take them somewhere interesting. But most readers seek tension, whether they know it or not, and if it's missing, they'll get off the bike, deciding that the writer isn't steering them anywhere interesting. What are the sources of tension in a piece of writing?

- *Narrative tension*. This is among the most common sources of tension, appealing to the nearly universal desire to know what's going to happen next. It depends on the tension between what the reader knows about the events described and what she *wants* to know. This has everything to do with readerly expectation; *will the story unfold in ways I expect?*
- *Causal tension*. A piece may dramatically establish a problem that makes readers wonder about its cause. In some ways, we are even more interested in the cause of a problem than its solution, but the problem must interest us first.
- *Emotional tension*. The writer seems to feel one way about something and as readers we expect him to feel differently. He was *glad* that his father was dead? The level of emotional tension depends on the extent to which the writer's feelings—either expressed or implied—defy our expectations, and our expectations may originate with our own feelings about how we'd feel in the same situation.
- *Thematic tension*. The writer offers an idea or way of seeing the subject that is at odds with the way a reader usually sees it, or juxtaposes two ideas that seem in

¹ Gerard, Phillip. *Creative Nonfiction*. Cincinnati: Story P, 1996.

- opposition. How might the writer resolve these apparent contradictions? How is it that she has come to see things this way?
- *Language tension.* Word choice, sentence length, even punctuation can create a voice and persona that we find compelling. Language alone, without much story, can introduce tension. We become fascinated with the persona.

Structure and tension

The design of a nonfiction piece has a great deal to do with whether it has sufficient tension to keep a reader reading. There are a range of strategies for introducing tension into writing through structure. Here are some of them:

- *Withholding information.* This is a risky one. Whenever we deliberately don't say what readers expect us to say, writers risk seeming overtly manipulative. The worst example of this is what John McPhee calls the "blind lead"—the beginning that withholds information and promises something dramatic later when a mouse not a lion emerges from its hole. But when its artfully done, carefully holding off a reader by parceling out information can work to introduce tension.
- *Manipulating time.* It's often said that narratives should begin in the middle, not the beginning. Writers have power over time that they don't have in life. This power can be used to create tension by structuring past and present in ways raise pressing questions. Why did that happen? What's the full story? What do these different moments have in common?
- *Juxtaposition.* The placement of ideas, moments, or information in proximity to each other can create tension, particularly when such an arrangement raises questions about their relationship. What could this scene possibly have to do with this one? Aren't these feelings contradictory?
- *Questions.* Writers often arrange material that raises questions in the reader's mind. But these may also be explicit. When the writer pauses to pose a question that arises from the material, she may do so to point directly to the tension that drives the piece or dictates its arrangement. These questions must, however, be well placed.
- *Voice.* Voice alone won't often create tension, but when it does the effect is often striking. The tension may arise from our sense that the persona or ethos of the writer is disturbing or puzzling, or perhaps seems odd given the subject. Sometimes the voice of the writer simply draws us in and this makes us vaguely uncomfortable. After all, we don't really know her. Why are we feeling this way?