



## Creating Narrative Tension in Fiction

### Guided Exercise from Jack Wang

#### *Acute tension:*

immediate tension, predicament in the present, answers the question “Why now?”

#### *Chronic tension:*

longstanding tension, predicament in the past, answers the question “What’s at stake?”

#### **Prompt #1**

Write the opening sentence of a story that establishes both acute and chronic tensions. Write as many opening sentences as you like.

Here’s an example of an opening sentence from a short story that establishes both acute and chronic tensions:

Lionel had been out of the hospital for only a few days when the potluck invitation came.

— Brandon Taylor  
“Potluck”

Here’s an example of an opening sentence from a novel that does the same:

In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her.

— Mohsin Hamid  
*Exit West*

## Prompt #2

When you have a sentence you're interested in, identify the acute and chronic tensions in the sentence, then write a longer story opening that establishes the acute tension in greater detail first before introducing the chronic tension.

Here's an example of a short story that establishes the acute tension first:

The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right. The work would affect only the houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop, where Shoba and Shukumar had lived for three years.

— Jhumpa Lahiri  
“A Temporary Matter”

After establishing the acute tension, the story then establishes the chronic tension:

Six months ago, in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor, three weeks before her due date... When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead.

## Prompt #3

Try another iteration of your story opening. This time, start with the chronic tension, the status quo soon to be interrupted, then introduce the acute tension. This will likely involve more than simply switching your paragraphs around. Which version of the story seems more effective?

Here's an example of a short story that introduces the chronic tension first:

Sohail and Helen had begun dating two years earlier, at Yale, where she was an undergraduate and he at the law school. After graduating the previous summer he had returned to his home in Pakistan, while she completed her senior year. They had agreed to put the question of their future in abeyance until she finished school—not the question of whether they would be together but of how: in Pakistan, New York, or somewhere else. Sohail had vaguely committed himself to joining his father's sprawling business—a sugar mill, farmlands, and much else. The degree had been a way to put off this step.

— Daniyal Mueenuddin  
“Our Lady of Paris”

After establishing the chronic tension, the story then establishes the acute tension:

When he announced to his mother that he would be going to Paris for Christmas, to meet Helen, she pursed her lips but said nothing.

#### **Prompt #4**

It's also possible to establish acute and chronic tensions simultaneously. Just as you can introduce both in a single sentence, you can introduce both in a single paragraph. That's another variation to try, elaborating on both at once.