



The Ultimate Scene Tension Checklist  
30 Questions to Strengthen Every Scene  
A practical self-editing workbook for fiction  
writers

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Hello there,

If you've downloaded my checklist, you're probably at that stage of your novel where you know the story works but sense it isn't quite as good as it could be.

If some of your scenes are feeling a bit flat, it's usually a sign nothing's actually happening – no shift, no change. The scene's going nowhere fast. The good news – it's a fixable problem, and this checklist will help you spot the issues and inject some conflict, stakes and forward momentum.

Happy editing! I'm here if you need any help or clarification.

*Wendy Ogilvie*



## The Checklist

Use this checklist whenever you're revising a scene. Print it out, or keep it beside your desk whenever your characters start being just a little *too* agreeable.

1. Take one scene from your current manuscript.
2. Work through the checklist honestly.
3. Highlight three boxes you couldn't tick.
4. Revise the scene focusing only on those three points.
5. Compare the new version with the original and notice how much more momentum the scene has.
6. Start on the next scene.

### Goals and Choices

Does every major character want something specific in this scene?

Is there genuine conflict rather than simply an obstacle?

*An obstacle slows a character down. Conflict forces them to make a difficult choice.*

Is there a clear scene question?

*For example: Will she confess? Will they escape? Will the detective find the missing clue?*

Is your protagonist making active choices rather than simply reacting to events?

Does every decision create a new problem or consequence?

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### Curiosity and Microtension

Have you avoided predictable emotional reactions? *Example. Ask: What is expected? Then do the opposite.*

Do your descriptions add emotional weight rather than simply describing the setting? *Use all five senses.*

Is there something unexpected that keeps the reader curious?

Are there moments where the reader wonders, “*What the...?*” or “*Why did they do that?*”

Does each page contain something that encourages the reader to keep going?

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### Internal and External Conflict

Does the external conflict connect to your character's internal struggle? *E.g., Is she ignoring his advances because she's scared to love again?*

Are outside events forcing your character to confront a fear, flaw or false belief?

Are your character's desires competing with their fears?

Is the emotional tension just as strong as the physical tension?

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### Dialogue and Subtext

Are your characters saying exactly what they mean?

*If they are, could the conversation become more interesting through subtext?*

Does the listener misunderstand, misinterpret or bring their own emotional baggage to the conversation?

Do different personalities naturally create friction? *Think cynical detective and psychic consultant.*

Are there interruptions, evasions or unfinished thoughts that create tension?

Does every conversation change something?

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## **Secrets, Stakes and Suspense**

- What information is each character missing?
  - Does the reader know something at least one character doesn't? *It's often a good idea to write these down.*
  - Are the consequences of failure clear?
  - Is there something important to lose?
  - Is there any form of time pressure, deadline or approaching event increasing the urgency?
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## **Pacing**

- Does the pace match the emotional intensity of the scene?
  - Have you removed unnecessary explanation or repetition?
  - Are long passages broken up with dialogue, action or interior thoughts?
  - Does each paragraph move the story forwards?
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## **Ending the Scene**

- Does the scene end with momentum?
  - Have you answered the scene question while introducing a new one?
  - Does something change before the scene finishes?
  - Will readers immediately want to read the next chapter?
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## **Writer Tip**

You don't need every box ticked in every scene.

Quiet scenes can still be full of tension. A difficult conversation over coffee can be just as gripping as a car chase if readers know what's at stake.

Aim to create curiosity, conflict and emotional investment. If your readers are desperate to know what happens next, your scene is doing its job.

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## **Common Mistakes**

- Trying to make every scene action-packed.
  - Mistaking obstacles for conflict.
  - Explaining emotions instead of creating them.
  - Ending scenes after everything has been resolved.
  - Forgetting the character's internal conflict.
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