

In cold blood:  
retaining the reader's  
interest through  
suspense and tension



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In modern literature, suspense and tension are almost essential in producing works that are both successful and interesting to the reader. These two aspects of literature are especially important in Truman Capote's novel, *In Cold Blood*, which delineates the story of how a mere robbery attempt concludes in the death of four well-respected and affable family members. Although the reader is cognizant of various outcomes in the story beforehand, Capote effectively retains the reader's interest through suspense and tension. Capote particularly engenders this suspense and tension by shifting between simultaneous events, waiting to disclose the details of the murder, and suggesting fallacies in America's judicial system. Suspense proves to be an essential aspect to this novel, particularly in the way in which it proves to be a new plot mechanism. For example, one way Capote introduces suspense is through the short segments within each chapter. He constantly switches back and forth between Dick and Perry and the people in Holcomb, leaving the reader longing to discover what happens on both perspectives of the story. More importantly, he ends many of the segments with surprising and suspenseful actions and thoughts. For example, when Nancy broaches her suspicions about the smell of cigarette smoke, Capote cunningly ends with this thought: " Before she could ask if this was really what Nancy meant, Nancy cut her off: ' Sorry, Susie. I've got to go. Mrs. Katz is here'" (22). This ending leaves the reader wondering whether Mr. Clutter, who possesses a strong aversion toward such matters, would actually take part in smoking. This suspected, sudden change in the daily habits of the family allows Capote to stir up a suspenseful atmosphere in the reader's mind because these details seem to foreshadow the murder.

In addition, Capote amplifies the suspense by ending the section on this <https://assignbuster.com/in-cold-blood-retaining-the-readers-interest-through-suspense-and-tension/>

note, leaving the reader at a climactic point. Furthermore, as Capote switches back to the murderers, he describes their preparations in a casual manner. The tensions thus increases as the reader becomes upset at the lack of morals of the murderers and the total obliviousness of the Clutter family toward the upcoming events. The constant switching also serves another purpose by bringing the reader into the actual story as he or she tries to keep up with simultaneous events as they occur. Furthermore, Capote presents many of the unfolding events through the testimonies of various citizens, which gives more credibility to the story. In addition to the timely shifts in the novel, Capote engenders suspense by waiting to disclose various details of the story, most importantly of the actual murders. Capote chooses to stop the description of the "score" just as the murderers approach the house: "Dick doused the headlights, slowed down, and stopped until his eyes were adjusted to the moon-illuminated night. Presently, the car crept forward" (57). After this passage, Capote skips straight to the discovery of the dead victims. Capote utilizes this very effective tactic of skipping ahead in order to build suspense. He surprises the reader and leaves him or her with the desire to continue in order to unearth the facts and details of that hideous night. In addition to building suspense, this method again places the reader in the eyes of the bemused Holcomb citizens, as they are equally clueless on the details surrounding the murders. Similarly, Capote does not explicitly introduce the murder plot: "Still no sign of Dick. But he was sure to show up; after all, the purpose of their meeting was Dick's idea, his 'score'" (14). Referring to the murder plot as the "score" serves various purposes. First, this reference adds to the suspenseful ambience because the reader cannot decipher its exact meaning; he or she

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can only construe that the term refers in some manner to the murder.

Secondly, it puts the reader in the eyes and thoughts of Perry because he too appears incognizant of the actual plan before meeting Dick. Finally, during the period between the meeting and the murders, Capote adheres to using the reference "score" so that he may keep any motives and details mysterious and suspenseful. Again, Capote masterfully puts the reader into the eyes of the curious Holcomb citizens because neither the reader nor the citizens become aware of the motive until much later in the novel. In addition to using suspense as an efficacious tool in retaining the reader's interest, Capote also brings into play an aspect of tension during the court trials and psychiatric evaluations. Capote commences to impose his own thoughts and beliefs into the story during the court trials. He lucidly demonstrates his condemnation of the M'Naghten Rule due to its tight strictures and inflexibility: "But had Dr. Jones been permitted to discourse on the cause of his indecision, he would have testified: 'Perry Smith shows definite signs of severe mental illness'" (296). By including the statements of Dr. Jones, if he would have been allowed to speak further, Capote evinces his concern and frustration over the utilization of the death penalty when dealing with the insane. A one word response to a question dealing with whether or not a person is insane is, of course, hardly sufficient to convey the full scope of the evaluation, especially if the subject's life depends on this evaluation. Capote also probes the inner mind of Perry Smith during his incarceration: "Eventually he wondered if perhaps he had invented them (a notion that he 'might not be normal, maybe insane' had troubled him 'even when I was little, and my sisters laughed because I liked moonlight. To hide in the shadows and watch the moon')" (265). This passage creates tension

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and the reader's mind vacillates on whether or not Perry experienced schizophrenia. Moreover, by including this passage, Capote foments a feeling of sympathy for the murderer. Throughout the beginning of the novel, the reader feels animosity towards Perry, but as Capote discloses these new details, the reader begins to reevaluate his or her previous convictions. Thus, Capote again allows the reader to see things through Perry's perspective. Once more, tension arises from a sudden shift in the mindset of the reader. Nonetheless, Capote leaves the reader with an ambiguous ending. Only the reader can decide whether Perry could acknowledge his actions as wrong on that horrific night or if the emotional and physical scars created by Perry's childhood drove him insane. Thus, because Capote effectively uses tools of suspense and tension, he retains the reader's interest throughout the entire novel. The simultaneous shifting between events, delaying of crucial facts and details till later in the story, and the questioning of the court's laws on cases dealing with the insane and the death penalty are only some of the mechanisms Capote utilizes to conceive an extremely powerful and intriguing novel.