OLLIE DRAWS THE SHAPE OF HIS THRILLER

Tension graphs and the rise and fall of a story

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Ollie Brennan's thriller began with a car chase through the docks at Felixstowe and ended with a shoot-out on a container ship. In between, he was fairly sure, a great many exciting things happened.

His writing group was less sure. "It's all very loud," said one of them, kindly. "But somewhere around the middle I started to drift."

Ollie, who was an accountant and believed in evidence, decided to measure it.

He went through his manuscript chapter by chapter and gave each one a score from one to ten for tension. Then he plotted the scores on graph paper, with chapter numbers along the bottom and tension up the side, and joined the dots.

The line started at nine, dipped briefly to eight, and then stayed at eight or nine for thirty-one chapters.

It looked less like a story than a very long, slightly bumpy shelf.

What a tension graph is

A tension graph is a simple chart of how intense your story feels at each point. It's sometimes called a story arc, a plot curve or a pacing chart. There is no standard version, and it's not a scientific measurement. It's a way of turning a feeling about your book into something you can see.

The scores are your own judgement, and they're rough. That's fine. What matters isn't the exact number for any single chapter. It's the overall shape.

How to draw one

Go through your outline or draft, chapter by chapter or scene by scene. For each, ask how much the reader is likely to be on the edge of their seat, worried, excited or desperate to know what happens next. Give it a number.

Then plot those numbers on a graph and join them up.

Some writers draw separate lines for different things: one for external danger, one for emotional intensity, one for mystery or suspense. Ollie started with one line. It told him plenty.

Why a flat line is a problem

It seems natural that a thriller should be tense all the time. But tension works by contrast. A reader's nerves can only stay on high alert for so long before they become used to it, and a constant level of danger begins to feel like normal.

Without quieter moments, the big moments have nothing to rise above. A car chase after another car chase is just traffic.

Ollie's graph showed that his book never let the reader breathe. So when the real climax came, on the container ship, it scored a nine, the same as almost everything else. It should have been the highest point in the book. Instead, it was one more shelf.

Peaks and valleys

The shape many stories follow, broadly speaking, is a series of peaks and valleys that rise gradually overall. Tension builds to a high point, eases off slightly, then builds again to a higher point, and so on, until the climax, which is usually the highest peak of all. After the climax, it falls away as the story resolves.

This isn't a rule every book must follow. Literary novels, cosy mysteries and slow-burning romances have their own shapes, and some deliberately break the pattern. But for a thriller, where readers come specifically for rising excitement, the general shape is a useful guide.

The valleys aren't wasted time. They're where characters react, make decisions, reveal something of themselves and plan their next move. They also give the reader enough rest to feel the next peak properly.

Reading Ollie's graph

Ollie redrew his graph with a pencil line showing the shape he wanted: lower near the beginning, rising in stages, a definite dip after the midpoint, and a final climb to the climax.

Then he compared the two lines.

The opening chase scored a nine where a seven would do. He could keep the chase, but if it was the most exciting thing in the first act, there was nowhere to build from. He shortened it and let the real threat emerge more gradually.

Chapters twelve to fifteen were all action scenes in a row. He turned one into a quieter chapter where his hero, a customs officer named Kieran, sits in his car outside his ex-wife's house, trying to decide whether to warn her. It scored a four on the graph. It was the chapter his writing group liked best.

The climax needed to stand alone. Ollie cut a gunfight two chapters before it, so that the container ship was the first real violence the reader had seen for some time. It now scored ten, and felt like it.

Other things you can chart

Once you've drawn one graph, you may find others useful. Some writers chart a character's emotional state, showing their high and low points across the book. Some chart the pace of revelations in a mystery, making sure clues and twists are spread out rather than clustered. Some chart the romantic tension between two characters, which follows its own peaks and valleys.

All of these turn something you sense into something you can see.

Don't let the graph write the book

A tension graph is a diagnostic tool. It can tell you where something might be wrong. It can't tell you how to fix it, and it can't measure everything that makes a scene work.

Use it as a way of looking at your book from a distance, then return to the pages themselves.

Ollie's revised graph now looked like a range of hills, getting steadily higher towards the right of the page. He pinned it above his desk next to the old one, as a reminder.

His writing group read the new draft and nobody drifted. One of them did say that the scene in the car outside his ex-wife's house had made her cry. Ollie, an accountant, gave it a four. He thought it might, on reflection, deserve a five.

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