

# Bourne toWrite...

creative writing  
workshops

## The Cliffhanger

*Cliffhanger: a type of narrative or a plot device in which the end is curiously abrupt, so that the main characters are left in a difficult situation, without offering any resolution of conflicts.*

Cliffhangers in any form of literature appeal to our curiosity. The main purpose of employing this device is to maintain suspense in the plot in order to ensure the interest and focus of the readers. It acts as bait to lead the readers from one part of the text to another with more interest than before.

Cliffhangers, undoubtedly, are enjoyable to read at the end of the chapters of novels. However, it can be very frustrating at the very end of a novel, as it leaves readers discontented after all the effort they put in to read the novel.

In a TV series, where the cliffhanger tool is perhaps most popular, they make use of this device to great effect. The viewers' favourite characters are left in a lurch, and the viewers yearn to know more about their fate.

Cliffhangers can also be used internally throughout a story. Every line and every paragraph should have a bit of drama at the end, a reward for the reader, and a reason to plunge forward.

There are many ways to create a cliffhanger. Obviously it depends on how the action is flowing through your story and of course the interaction of the main characters, but here are eight classic cliffhanger types.

### **1. The provocative question.**

This works for a character's internal question, a narrative question, or a question exchanged between two or more characters. The question is the easiest method to master and tends to focus on the "W" questions, Who, What, Where, When, and Why. I find the W questions low on the cliffhanger scale, but they're an old standby. This style works best when the question is one the reader is already considering.

### **2. The statement of fact or accusation.**

Use this cliffhanger for one character to confront another with damaging information or to announce some life changing news. "I'm pregnant." This cliffhanger will usually create emotional tension, and drive the story towards a *new* short or long-term goal or plot complication. It also works for a plot reversal or setback.

### **3. The description of the next chapter's opening setting.**

This is a mystery technique, often used to unveil a dead body at the end of a chapter. This type of cliffhanger often leads to an introspective phase of the story. You don't have to kill off a character to make this one work, you can also fill the room with streamers and balloons. The descriptive cliffhanger marks the start of a new storyline, or a reversal.

### **4. The demand for action or response.**

This cliffhanger centres on an event the characters can't ignore, and may include elements of danger. The classic example is a police officer knocking at the front door. The demand for action works great for leading into a major event, or an event that drives a group into action, such as a river flooding over its banks. The demand for action always precedes a dramatic part of the story, or you're not using it correctly. Be careful of using a fake demand for action, (an anticlimactic problem) the reader can interpret that as cheating.

## **5. The kiss, the almost kiss and the slap in the face.**

This method is the romance writer's workhorse and helps heighten the character's emotional tension. Variations of this one are the mistaken identity reveal, or the refused gift. This one works best early in the novel when the characters are still a bit unsure of each other.

## **6. The mystery/missing object.**

We've all read these cliffhangers, it's the old trunk in the attic, the long-lost letter that slipped behind the china hutch; or any other object of significance. Make sure you do not try to trick the reader with this one either, the missing letter should never turn out to be a shopping list, unless something very incriminating (strychnine) is on it.

This is a suspense style of cliffhanger, good for revealing a major clue. This method works great at the start of the ending climax, but you can also use it for a mid book complication.

## **7. Foreshadowing.**

You can use this cliffhanger when the characters are at a crossroad, or a big change in the plot is coming. Foreshadowing works great for building suspense at any stage of a book.

## **8. The pledge/declaration.**

This one is commonly an internal commitment for action on the part of a lead character. "I will avenge my father's death." Antagonists also use them when they vow to create mayhem or take revenge. This is a dramatically charged cliffhanger, and it always follows some emotional catharsis or a feeling of being cornered. This cliffhanger always changes the character's path in a profound way. This method can work early or late in a novel. You should not use this for a minor decision and you really only get one shot at this type of cliffhanger. If you over use the pledge your character looks uncommitted.