

What is a Cliffhanger? And How They Keep Your Readers Turning Pages

When you find yourself caught up in a book until long past midnight, what is it that keeps you turning that page? [Engaging, relatable characters](#)? [Gorgeous, multi-sensory settings](#)? Or maybe it's the [powerful, evocative themes](#) that teach us something about the world. All of these things make for an effective story, but when you “just one more chapter” your way through an entire book, it's likely due to a simple literary device: the cliffhanger.

Cliffhangers are as old as storytelling, dating all the way back to *the Arabian Nights*. We'll look at what a cliffhanger is, some examples of cliffhangers from literature, and how to use them to take your story to the next level.

What is a cliffhanger?

A cliffhanger is a literary device that ends a section of a story on a big, dramatic question. This section might be a scene, a chapter, or even an entire novel in a continuing series. This big question makes the reader want to keep going to find out the answer.

The term “cliffhanger” found its way into modern language in the 1930s, when short serial films became popular with theatre-goers. Ending each one on a dramatic question of suspense kept audiences returning for the next instalment. Long before this, however, the first storyteller to make use of the cliffhanger device was a brave young woman by the name of...

Scheherazade.

The overarching story of *the Arabian Nights* follows a wicked king who takes a new bride every night, only to have them knocked off the next morning. Scheherazade, fighting for her life with nothing but raw chutzpah, offers to tell the king a story. Only she's just so tired, she can't possibly tell him the ending yet... it will have to wait until tomorrow.

She does this for one thousand and one nights. The king agrees to keep her alive just one more day, just *one more day*, waiting to see what happens next. After this has gone on for a

while he begins to reflect that maybe he's been a bit of a misogynistic jerk and makes an honest woman of her after all.

Whether or not Scheherazade was a real person is open to debate, but her story shows the power of the dramatic question — the only question, really, that matters in a good story: *and then what happened?*

When should you use cliffhangers in your story?

Cliffhangers are a pretty great survival tool to have on hand if you ever find yourself married against your will to a homicidal ruler with a weakness for a good story. If you manage to dodge that particular fate, however, cliffhangers are still a wonderful literary device to create tension in your story and engage your readers.

Cliffhangers are most effective at natural breaks in the story where the reader might get up to go to the bathroom, make some dinner, or turn off the lights and go to sleep like a responsible human being. These natural breaks are things like the end of a chapter, the moment where you move from one point of view to another, or the moment where you jump forward (or sometimes backwards) in time. These are all easy places for the reader to put your book aside — your goal is to make that choice as difficult as possible.

Even if they do put the story down until another day (readers do have lives that need attending to, on occasion), an effective cliffhanger will keep them turning your story over in their thoughts and excited to get back to reading it.

After you write your book and are [sharing it with trusted readers](#) to get their feedback, ask them to make a note of where they put down your book. Then, as you go back and edit, you can think about adding cliffhangers to these places to make them more exciting.

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