Suspense by Design

Trace choices that turn a discovery into a tense scene.

12.T.T.1 "Narrative Techniques: Evaluate and apply narrative techniques to enhance text's appeal to audiences or achieve specific purposes."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline three phrases that build suspense and circle two details that reveal Mara's personal stake. Write a brief margin note beside each group explaining its effect on a reader.

The Harbor Drawer

1 At 2:13 a.m., Mara stood alone in the city archive's basement, where rainwater tapped steadily against the narrow windows. Her flashlight found a brass drawer labeled HARBOR, 1968. She had come for shipping records, but a faint scraping sounded behind the cabinet. Mara tightened her grip on the drawer's handle. Years earlier, her grandfather had vanished during a storm near the same harbor. She told herself the noise was only pipes. Then the scraping stopped. In the sudden silence, even the basement's old clock seemed to hold its breath.

2 Instead of opening the drawer, Mara listened. A drop fell from a pipe and struck the concrete. Another drop followed, slower. She remembered her grandfather's warning: "Never trust water that is too quiet." The cabinet shuddered. Mara stepped back, and her flashlight beam slid across a framed photograph on the wall. In it, young dockworkers grinned beside a rescue boat. Her grandfather stood at the edge, one hand raised. A dark shape blurred the corner behind him. The image shifted as Mara leaned closer. The dark shape was not a shadow.

3 The cabinet door swung open before Mara touched it. Inside, no person waited. A soaked canvas sat beneath the records, wrapped around a metal case. Mara unfastened it, expecting a weapon or a relic. Instead, she found a cassette tape marked FOR ELISE. Her grandmother's name made her knees weaken. The basement speaker crackled without being switched on. A man's voice said, "If you hear this, the harbor did not take me." Above her, the storm hammered the windows, but Mara no longer heard it. She pressed the tape to her chest and reached for the player.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the exact opening time and the slow sequence of falling drops affect the pace and mood of the scene?

2. How does Mara's memory of her grandfather change the reader's understanding of why the drawer matters?

3. Why does the writer delay explaining what is inside the cabinet until the final paragraph?

4. How does the final line about Mara no longer hearing the storm show a change in the scene's focus?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 90 to 120 word suspense scene about someone finding an unexpected object. Use sensory detail, slowed pacing, and delayed information to build tension for readers. Include one detail that gives the discovery personal importance to the character.

ANSWER KEY

Suspense by Design

GRADE 12 · 12.T.T.1

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline three phrases that build suspense and circle two details that reveal Mara's personal stake. Write a brief margin note beside each group explaining its effect on a reader. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the exact opening time and the slow sequence of falling drops affect the pace and mood of the scene?	**They slow the scene and make the setting feel precise, quiet, and threatening, which builds suspense.**
2	How does Mara's memory of her grandfather change the reader's understanding of why the drawer matters?	**It gives Mara a personal connection to the harbor and makes the discovery important beyond her search for shipping records.**
3	Why does the writer delay explaining what is inside the cabinet until the final paragraph?	**The delay creates uncertainty and encourages readers to keep reading for an answer.**
4	How does the final line about Mara no longer hearing the storm show a change in the scene's focus?	**The focus shifts from the outside storm and Mara's fear to the urgent mystery of her grandfather's message.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

By the time Niko reached the school greenhouse, the final bell had been silent for an hour. Condensation silvered the glass, hiding the rows of seedlings inside. He had promised his sister he would bring home her blue notebook, yet he could not remember leaving it here. The door resisted, then opened with a soft click. On the potting bench, the notebook lay open to a page he had never seen. A wet thumbprint darkened the margin. Niko turned toward the heater when it began to hum, although the greenhouse had no power after sunset. From behind the tomato vines, someone whispered his name.

Accept supported explanations of how pacing, sensory imagery, delayed information, and personal stakes affect readers. For Part 3, accept varied suspense scenes that are 90 to 120 words and clearly use all required techniques.