FREE GUIDE · VIOLIN & ANY MUSICIAN

5 Formulas of Tension and Release

Make the listener feel that something is missing—and decide for yourself when to give it to them.

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IT'S NOT INSPIRATION. IT'S PHYSICS.

Before You Start

Every formula in this guide does the exact same thing: it creates an expectation, and you decide when to fulfill it. The listener doesn't need to know music theory—their body recognizes when something is left open and craves closure. Your job is to control the *when*.

All examples are in **D Major** (the key of the reel) and in first position. Once you feel them under your fingers, transpose them to any key.

The 3 Multipliers

They work with all 5 formulas. If you only remember these three, you have already leveled up.

1. **Silence:** A pause of half a second to one full second right before resolving. Longer pause, bigger payoff. If you go past ~2 seconds, the listener usually thinks you made a mistake—experiment and calibrate.

2. **The Swell:** On the tense note, widen your vibrato and apply a bit more bow weight. On the release note, relax: lighter bow, slower vibrato.

3. **The Delay:** Pull back just before resolving and arrive a hair late. That fraction of a second is what the listener feels as "almost, almost..."

> **A VIOLINIST'S TRICK FOR ALL 5 FORMULAS**
>
> Resolve on an open string whenever you can. Open D and open A set the other strings vibrating sympathetically; the release sounds bigger and feels more like "home" than with a finger down.

How to read each sheet: What it is · How to do it · On the violin · Golden rule · 60-second exercise. Do the exercise on each sheet before moving to the next—5 minutes in total.

The 5 Formulas

01 The Delayed Leading Tone	C♯ → D · The Reel Formula
WHAT IT IS	The note right below the tonic (C♯ in D Major) has a magnetic pull toward D. You climb up to it, stop, and refuse to let go.
HOW TO DO IT	Climb the scale D–E–F♯–G–A–B–C♯ and stop on C♯. Hold it with a growing vibrato. Silence. Resolve to D.
ON THE VIOLIN	C♯ on the A string with your 2nd finger; play it a touch high (hugging the 3rd finger)—a high leading tone pulls harder. Resolve to the open D string or to D with the 3rd finger on the A string.
GOLDEN RULE	**The longer you hold the leading tone, the sweeter the D. But always close the phrase: never leave it hanging completely.**
60S EXERCISE	Play the scale and stop on C♯ with silences of 0.5 / 1 / 1.5 / 2 seconds before resolving. Keep the one that "itches" the most.

02 The Suspension	G over D → F♯ · Tension to Release
WHAT IT IS	You hold onto a note even though the chord underneath has already changed. It clashes for a moment and then steps down smoothly into the note that fits.
HOW TO DO IT	Over a D chord (piano, guitar, loop, or drone), hold the G. Let it live for a full beat. Step down to F♯.
ON THE VIOLIN	G on the D string with your 3rd finger; step down to F♯ with your 2nd finger. Make the descent in a single bow without breaking—one note that "melts" into the next.
GOLDEN RULE	**The tense note lands on a strong beat; the resolution on a weak beat. And it always resolves downward by step, never by leap.**
60S EXERCISE	Loop a D chord for 4 bars. In each bar, play a suspension with a different duration: 1 beat, 2 beats, 3 beats, and the final one with a brief silence before stepping down.

03 The Sigh (Appoggiatura)	F♯ → B → A · Tension to Release
WHAT IT IS	You leap to a note that doesn't belong to the chord on a strong beat, then fall by step to one that does. It sounds like a human sigh.
HOW TO DO IT	Over a D Major chord, leap from F♯ to B, lean into it (long note), and fall onto A (short note).
ON THE VIOLIN	F♯ on the D string (2nd finger) → B on the A string (1st finger) → open A. Load bow weight onto the B and release onto the A.
GOLDEN RULE	**The tense note is long and heavy; the release note is short and light. Reversed, it doesn't sigh.**
60S EXERCISE	Play the figure both ways: long tense / short release, and the reverse. Record yourself and listen to which one truly sighs.

04 The Deceptive Cadence	A7 → B minor (instead of D)
WHAT IT IS	A7 promises D to the ear. You give it B minor instead. It isn't a false resolution—it's a postponed resolution.
HOW TO DO IT	Play the progression D – G – A7 – Bm. End the first phrase with the deceptive cadence, and end the second phrase with a true A7 → D.
ON THE VIOLIN	Arpeggiate A7 (A–C♯–E–G) and climb into B minor (B–D–F♯) instead of landing on D. Let the final F♯ ring without closing.
GOLDEN RULE	**The first phrase frustrates; the second one pays off. Release is worth twice as much when you make the listener wait for it.**
60S EXERCISE	Take any melody of yours in D and replace the final D of the first verse with B minor. Listen to how it demands the second phrase.

05 The Dominant Pedal	Sustained Open A → D
WHAT IT IS	One long, steady note underneath (A) while everything else moves above it. Tension accumulates until you finally release the pedal.
HOW TO DO IT	Hold the open A string and climb a melody on the E string, from E up to B. The higher it climbs, the tighter it pulls. Release and land on D.
ON THE VIOLIN	Double stop: open A + melody on the E string. When the resolution arrives, release the A and drop down to the open D string.

05 The Dominant Pedal	Sustained Open A → D
GOLDEN RULE	**Swell the volume as the melody rises, and resolve with less, not more—the release is gentle.**
60S EXERCISE	Hold an A pedal for 8 beats with an ascending melody on the E string. Resolve to open D after a brief silence.

The Final Recipe: 4 Bars

Put the formulas together in a single phrase. Record yourself and notice which bar gives you goosebumps.

BAR	FORMULA	WHAT YOU DO
1	**5. A Pedal**	Establish background tension with the open A string.
2	**2. Suspension**	Hold G over the D chord; resolve smoothly down to F♯.
3	**4. Deceptive Cadence**	A7 → B minor. Frustrate the listener's expectation.
4	**1. Delayed Leading Tone**	Climb to C♯, pause in silence, and resolve to open D. This is where you cash in.

Don't Play Violin? It Works the Same Way

INSTRUMENT	HOW TO APPLY IT
PIANO	Delayed leading tone in the right hand (C♯ → D). Repeated A pedal in the left hand.
GUITAR	Classic suspension: Dsus4 → D. Deceptive cadence: A7 → Bm.
VOICE	Hold the leading tone (C♯), take a breath, and then sing the tonic.
PRODUCTION	The silence before the drop is Formula 1: pull out the bass, leave one second of air, and hit with everything.

“Composing is knowing how long to make the listener wait.”

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