



## The Core of Character

*“If you have a problem with the third act, the real problem is in the first act.”*

-Billy Wilder

Wilder was speaking from his experience as a Hollywood storyteller, but the above nugget of wisdom applies to all forms of storytelling. And I’ve found it to be true, time and again.

I’ve brainstormed and outlined using index cards and spreadsheets, papered my walls with blank calendars that I color-code with my timeline, and mapped my story’s virtual skeleton with grease pencil on my mirrored closet doors. But brainstorming begets brainstorming; my story evolves and my understanding of my characters deepens.

Moreover, I gloss over something or forget it completely and sure enough, it comes back to haunt me in the proverbial third act. In spite of all my planning, my story runs into a ditch that I should have noticed sooner. Invariably, whatever problem I’m having has nothing to do with the section of the story I’m working on; the seeds of trouble were planted in a much earlier chapter. Billy Wilder was right.

So, when a story runs out of steam, how do we identify the problem? How do we know exactly *where* the problem started if we didn’t know a problem even *existed*? Or how do we take that first raw idea, that first brainstorm, and coax a full-blown story from it?

We start with a principal question: What does your protagonist—your main character—*want*? As simple as this question may sound, and as obvious as the answer may be to you, the writer, a story lives or dies by that answer. Knowing what your protagonist wants is the difference between a finished short story, novel or script, and that first brainstorm or “*what if...?*” that never leaves your brain.

And what about those ideas that *do* graduate from the brain to the page—those unfinished

stories that run out of steam a few thousand words in? Revisiting the question “*What does my protagonist want?*” can often rescue these unfinished stories from the shredder.

What your protagonist wants—their primary goal or objective—is the core of *who they are*. Their goal guides their decisions, their decisions fuel their actions, their actions elicit consequences, and these consequences foist new choices upon your protagonist who must then take further action in pursuit of their desired goal. Taken together, this cycle of events forms the plot, *i.e.*, the spine of your story (it helps to remember that *plot* is also a navigational term—an active verb. Think of your protagonist as *plotting the course* of your story with their decisions). So, this principal question isn’t so simple after all.

## What does your protagonist want?

Take a moment to consider something you’re working on. It could be a story that’s well underway, or one still in its infancy (that “*What if...?*” waiting patiently in a notebook). Think about what your main character *wants*. Got it? Now let’s unpack your answer with a couple of supporting questions, starting from the outside in:

## What does it look like?

This first supporting question may seem as simple as the original, and the answer just as obvious. But again that’s only to *you*, the writer. What about your reader, your audience? How will they know your protagonist has achieved what they set out to do? What does your reader see on the page (or your viewing audience on the stage or screen)? It’s important to be as specific as possible, or the answer—no matter how obvious to the writer—will escape the audience.

The answer to what your character’s main goal looks like means viewing it **externally** and **objectively**, even if that goal is something intangible or difficult to measure (*e.g.*, a relationship, emotional closure). Your main character wants something—to attain a goal or acquire some person/object of their desire—and what their success (or failure) looks like determines the external shape of your story (that is, those events your audience witnesses). What they’re pursuing might be difficult or impossible to measure, but their success in achieving or attaining it should be immediately recognized. Now let’s examine the principal question—or your answer to it— from the inside out.

## What does it mean to them?

Here, we turn from the external and objective to the **internal** and **subjective**. Once you know *what* your protagonist wants, you must also determine *why* they want it. Depending on

your story and/or protagonist, answering this next supporting question may be trickier. Or not. But the meaning behind your protagonist's goal will determine the choices they make, and thus their subsequent actions (and ultimately, as above, your story). Remember, different people can want the same thing but for very different reasons, and thus might take radically different actions to attain it.

Depending on your protagonist's goal, your answer to one of the two supporting questions might be self-evident; the other might take some head-scratching. Let's apply them both to a pair of specimens below, starting with a generic(ish) teen rom-com story:

**The protagonist wants to take the most attractive and popular person in their high school to the prom.**

**1) What does that look like?**

- showing up at their door in a rented limo in the final chapter/scene, their date beaming brightly*
- arriving at the prom, elbows locked*
- ending with that first slow dance*

There are any number of ways to tackle this, but the external/objective cues to your audience likely wouldn't take much brainstorming. But...

**2) What does it mean to them? Why do they want it?**

- a long-standing crush/emotional fulfillment*

That's one possible reason. But consider:

- a shallow bid for popularity*
- provoking jealousy in an ex or a rival*

If either of these (or any number of others) are the case, then it's time to rethink the answer to, *What does that look like?* Because those reasons are going to make for very different pursuits of that goal, and thus very different stories. Regardless of the shape this story takes, the protagonist's ultimate goal is fairly easy to convey to the audience. But consider something less tangible:

**The main character wants to reconcile with an estranged parent.**

**1) What does that look like?**

- a deathbed apology/plea for forgiveness*
- a surprise phone call on a holiday*
- an invitation to a wedding, birthday, or other major celebration*
- silently hugging for the first time in years*

For me, the possible answers aren't as obvious this time; there are as many ways to show this as there are writers who tackle the subject matter. However, the rest is almost self-explanatory:

## **2) What does it mean to them? Why do they want it?**

*-closure/profound emotional healing*

You may have a different idea, and of course one could say that a character has no desire for reconciliation but rather some other ulterior motive (*e.g.*, an inheritance). This, however, would be their *true goal*, which calls for the writer to take another look at what it looks like. And that's the reason I ask myself these questions when I'm stuck midway through a story. Because I very often figure out my protagonist is after something other than what I'd planned for them. So, take a good look at what you're working on and ask yourself:

- What does my protagonist want?
- What does that look like?
- What does it mean to them?

Take your time and really give it some thought. Once you have all three answers, there's one final question to tackle:

## **If my protagonist achieves their goal, is my story over?**

Naturally you'll have some threads to wrap up, perhaps a subplot or two. But if your character were to achieve their goal on the first page, would any of those threads or subplots matter? If your answer to "would the story be over?" is a resounding *yes*, then congratulations—you've just found the core of your main character and the beating heart of your story.

Now of course, your character *would* likely achieve their aim on the first page (or soon after) without encountering resistance from someone or something standing between them and what they want. We'll talk about conflict next time.

Ladies and gentlemen, start your Underwoods.