

Positive Conflict

(or, Narrative Conflict for Beginners)

Fact: Nobody has ever paid to watch an MMA fighter shadowbox; nobody has ever cheered an NBA team dominating the scoreboard—slam dunk after slam dunk—because they're the only five players on the court. Unless the athletes—alone or in teams—are pitted against each other, there's no competition. It may be good exercise, but it's no sport.

We previously discussed how your protagonist's primary goal is the driving force of your story. We then looked at questions that help a writer identify this goal. In brief, a writer needs to know *what* their main character wants and *why*. (A character's reasons for wanting something will largely determine how they go about getting it.) Finally, *If my protagonist achieves their primary goal, is my story over?* Answering *yes* is one way to identify the beating heart of a story. But you can't have a cage match with just one fighter—he or she needs an opponent, and so does your protagonist. If your main character has no opponent, you have no story. A story needs *conflict*.

It is the writer's job to cause pain and misery to the main characters and to constantly throw peril in their way so that you block them from getting what they want.

-Chuck Wendig

The protagonist finds their opponent in the *antagonist*. Once you've determined what your protagonist wants, ask yourself, *What's stopping them?* More specifically, *Who or what is preventing my main character from reaching his/her goal?* The answer is *your antagonist*. (For now, we'll consider the *antagonist* as a single character opposing your protagonist. We'll discuss other forms of antagonism shortly.) Just like your protagonist, your antagonist *wants* something. The writer needs to know *what it looks like* (i.e., how the audience will know whether the antagonist has succeeded or failed) and *what it means to them* (i.e., why they want it, which will shape how they pursue it). And, as with the protagonist, the writer should ask, *If my antagonist were to achieve their goal, would my story be over?*

As before, **yes** means you've got a handle on your antagonist.

But whatever they are, the desires of your protagonist and antagonist *must be incompatible*. Whether these characters consciously oppose each other or interfere by chance, both cannot have what they want. (Think of an election or a foot race—there's only one winner.) In pursuit of their goals, each will make decisions and take actions that will run them afoul of the other. This is your story's central conflict.

While it's an essential component of storytelling, *conflict* doesn't have to mean *combat*. Are a protagonist and antagonist sworn enemies? Sometimes, yes. Other times, they're close friends, colleagues, or family members acting with their best intentions but to mutually exclusive ends. A story's conflict can be intentional, personal, and savage (*The Janes*, Louisa Luna)—or accidental, impersonal, and sometimes hilarious (*After Hours*, Martin Scorsese, dir.). Lastly, a main character might be a conniving dirtbag or a shining example of humanity; their opposition might want to destroy all life on earth or just want to persuade a loved one into rehab. *Protagonist* doesn't always mean *hero*; *antagonist* doesn't always mean *villain*.

Example A: The antagonist wants to kill the protagonist, and the protagonist wants to stay alive. Only one of these characters can succeed—the protagonist either lives or dies. This is a straight-up hero/villain scenario, and their goals are fundamentally incompatible.

Example B: A son or daughter wants to put their aging parent into assisted care. The parent refuses, and their rift is spreading to the extended family. As before, only one of two results is possible (in this narrow, unnuanced example). The stakes are high, yet there is no ill will between them so there is no clear hero or villain. Nonetheless, the two goals are incompatible.

For your protagonist, resistance can come from another character, bad weather, low self-confidence, unfair regulations, oppressive laws, or plain bad luck. In the study of fiction, the various story conflicts have been traditionally broken down into four broad categories, which serve as tools for readers in understanding fiction.

CHARACTER VS. CHARACTER

The protagonist's primary challenge comes from another character with an incompatible goal. We see this conflict in Westerns where the hero and villain are clearly defined (and their conflict is physically violent), but it can take many forms that don't give us an obvious "good guy" or "bad guy."

If the main character's not in jeopardy—physical, psychological, emotional, whatever—then you don't have any tension, and you don't have a story.

-Stephen Graham Jones

CHARACTER VS. SOCIETY

The protagonist is at odds with their community or civilization at large (think of an underdog fighting an unjust system). This conflict is at the root of many contemporary stories about social inequality (racial or economic, for example), as well as those set in dystopian or post-apocalyptic worlds.

CHARACTER VS. ENVIRONMENT

A protagonist battling hostile elements is the basis for most survival stories. Though often called *character vs. nature* (a survivor adrift on a raft in the Pacific), this environment could also be man-made (the last crew member aboard a damaged space ship). ***Good Morning, Midnight*** (Lily Brooks-Dalton) is an example of this conflict in both natural and man-made settings.

CHARACTER VS. SELF

A protagonist pitted against himself/herself is struggling with their own limits, whether imaginary, self-imposed, or clinical. This could take the form of self-doubt, a deeply rooted phobia, or a life-threatening addiction. As the saying goes, “Sometimes you are your own worst enemy.”

Your protagonist might confront multiple forces of antagonism either one after the next or all at the same time. We can see these four broad categories in our earlier examples: A soldier overtakes his captor and flees (*character vs. character*), but a freak storm thwarts his escape (*character vs. environment*). Lost in enemy territory, the soldier must survive the night without a fire, provisions, or a weapon (*character vs. environment* again). However, the biggest threat by far is the soldier’s own fear, confusion, and growing sense of helplessness (*character vs. self*).

Some of these can be tricky. How do you know what your antagonist “wants,” if your antagonist is a flood or a forest fire? Moreover, additions to the four main categories of conflict have surfaced in recent years:

CHARACTER VS. FATE

CHARACTER VS. SUPERNATURAL/EXTRATERRESTRIAL

CHARACTER VS. TECHNOLOGY/MACHINE

CHARACTER VS. INSTITUTION

The distinction among these isn’t always black and white, and opinions differ on their names and where/how they fit within the rest. Some sources count as many as seven categories; others list these newcomers as subcategories of the classic four. *Fate* can be referred to as *destiny* or *the gods*. *Supernatural* can be paired with *fate* or *extraterrestrial* or listed on its own. *Character vs. institution* usually appears under *character vs. society* but occasionally on its own.

This can all certainly sound confusing. Aside from scientific accuracy, what's the difference between a vampire or a giant insect versus an angry momma bear or a mountain lion? Is ***The Body Snatchers*** (Jack Finney), aka ***Invasion of the Body Snatchers*** (Don Siegel, dir), *character vs. extraterrestrial* or *vs. society*? Is *character vs. technology* different from *character vs. environment*, or is it a subcategory? The replicants of ***Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*** (Philip K. Dick), aka ***Blade Runner*** (Ridley Scott, dir.), are indistinguishable from human beings. Is that story *character vs. character*? Or *character vs. technology/machine*? ***2001: A Space Odyssey*** (Arthur C. Clarke) could also be *character vs. machine*—but aren't the films of Buster Keaton, as well? Ultimately, it's up to the writer to decide how these categories of conflict can help shape a story. And, like any tool, if it doesn't make your job easier, set it aside and find one that does.

As undesirable as conflict may be in real life, stories cannot exist without it. Just as your protagonist must want something, there must be an opposing force—an antagonist—preventing them from getting it. While we often think of the protagonist and antagonist as violent adversaries (hero and villain), they don't have to be; conflict doesn't mean combat. Conflict simply means the primary goals of the protagonist and antagonist are incompatible. Pursuit of a goal requires action, and incompatible goals will yield incompatible actions. Whether out of spite, vengeance, or loving intentions, whether accidental or deliberate, the collision of incompatible actions create a story's central conflict.

Ladies and gentlemen, start your Underwoods.

Questions about the Buellton Library Writers' Workshop? Email us at buelltonlibrary@cityofgoleta.org.