

# **NO CONFLICT, NO STORY**



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# NO CONFLICT, NO STORY

When I was in my thirties, I wrote a short story about a woman who found her elderly neighbor dead, sitting in his chair in the workroom of his apartment. The story is largely her reminiscing about her relationship with him and how he grew up. It was a nostalgic and charming story, and I loved it and so sent it to a magazine. They replied that while it was well written, it lacked conflict, and they rejected it. I was disappointed, but when I reflected on their comments, I realized they were right. While the story was a lovely profile of the relationship between the two characters, there really was no discernable conflict and nothing to draw the reader into the story.

## WHY IS CONFLICT SO IMPORTANT?



Many writing sources will claim the only reason we read a story is to follow the main character as they engage with and eventually overcome the main conflict.

But what is conflict in a story? And what does that mean?

Conflict in fiction is the *struggle between opposing forces* that stands in

the way of the lead character easily achieving their goals. This struggle, or conflict, is a main ingredient in driving the story forward. Think about it. If your character has an important goal they feel they must attain, then anything blocking their ability to achieve that goal means the character has to find ways to keep moving forward or they fail.

Whether the conflict is battling an invasion of aliens, finding the strength to survive being stranded alone on an island, or fighting to win back a long lost love, conflict provides the depth and complexity to a story that keeps readers turning pages. Readers want to know whether or not the protagonist will succeed. Therefore, without some sort of conflict that hooks a reader's attention, readers are likely to get bored and stop reading.

Conflict requires high stakes to be effective, and it's critical that the reader understand what the character stands to gain or lose. Think back to some of your favorite movies and books and ask yourself what it was about those stories that attracted you. Most likely the protagonist faced some sort of major conflict and risked something important, i.e. their life, their career, a family member, their reputation and so forth.

Consider *Star Wars* where the external conflict involves the rebels' battle against the Empire. Like so many other popular stories, *Star Wars* doesn't only rely on an external conflict, however. A major focus of the story is Luke Skywalker's difficulty in mastering the 'force' that will ultimately make the difference between winning and losing the all-important battle?

## **REASONS A STORY NEEDS CONFLICT**

There are a number of reasons that a story benefits from a main conflict. These include:

- 1) Without conflict, a story can become stagnant, even boring. For instance, if the story is basically that boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, and then boy gets the girl and lives happily ever after, it's just too easy. There's nothing significant for the reader to latch onto. If, however, the story is boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl and then gets into a major accident where he ends up in a wheelchair, well, now we're hooked wondering what will happen. Will he get the girl? Will she dismiss him now that he's disabled? Will he lose himself in depression and thoughts of failure? All these questions keep us hooked on the story.
- 2) Conflict moves the plot forward by forcing the character to act or do something to change his situation. That's far more interesting than if the world is handed to him on a silver platter.
- 3) Through conflict, the risks of failure become clear—and so do the stakes. If deployed properly, readers will be engaged by the tension of the protagonist struggling to keep his head above water and begin to cheer for him.

- 4) Conflict reveals character by forcing your protagonist to make tough decisions and take action he might not otherwise take. The reader is able to watch him struggle with these decisions, weighing the pros and cons until something forces him to do something.

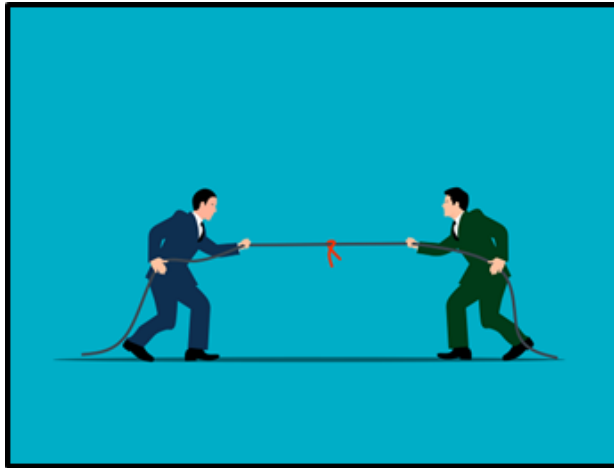


5) Conflict creates drama infused with emotion, and emotion is key to getting your readers glued to the page. Emotions allow the reader to care about what happens.

6) Conflict will help the protagonist to create new relationships or perhaps rebuild old ones with individuals who may (or may not) have the ability to lend support to the protagonist during the conflict.

7) Conflict removes the mask a character might hide behind and forces them to reveal their true nature.

- 8) Conflict gives your character an opportunity to grow and change, which is far more interesting than watching them wallow in self-pity.



## TYPES OF CONFLICT

Conflict gives the story depth and meaning and can be internal or external in nature. Until the main conflict is revealed, the reader will search for why the story was written in the first place, so if you wait too long to reveal the conflict, readers might give up.

There are three broad categories that most conflicts will fall within.

### **Man vs Man or Entity**

### **Man vs Himself**

### **Man vs God/Nature/Supernatural**



**Man vs Man** is probably the most common use of conflict and includes everything from a murder mystery where the detective is pitted against a deceptive killer, to a love story where a man is attempting to win the love of a woman, to a story where two women compete for the same top position in a company. In Man vs Man, the story revolves around someone (the antagonist) trying to stop or best the protagonist, and the protagonist succeeding in the end.

In this case, when the antagonist isn't human, it falls into the 'entity' category and can include not only aliens but robots or even AI, as in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In Man vs Entity, rather than an individual having to outwit another human being, the lead character must outwit the entity (*War of the Worlds*), or rely on intelligence or raw strength to win the battle as in the movie *Alien*.

A caution here is the movie *ET*. While ET is a movie about an alien, the conflict is still Man vs Man because in this particular story, the protagonist is the alien, and it's the US government that's coming after him. In this case, the kids are secondary characters fighting against the government to save ET.



**Man vs Himself** relies on the protagonist suffering from a major *internal* conflict. Man vs Himself can be the main conflict in a story (*The King's Speech*) or a secondary conflict which serves to deepen the plot. Many stories will involve both. *The Lord of the Rings* is a perfect example of this. On the surface, Frodo and his band of followers must battle a long list of monsters before reaching Mordor. These are all external conflicts.

At the center of the story, however, is Frodo's own sense of insecurity. He's only a Hobbit after all and has never even been out of the Shire let alone in battle, and he's never had to fight for his life. And yet, the ring keeps drawing him under its power, forcing him to constantly resist it. By the end of the story, we've seen Frodo grow and change as an individual because of the conflict(s) he's been forced to endure. And the greatest of those was overcoming his own self-doubts.

Stories like the movie *Castaway* are also Man vs Himself. In this case the protagonist (the Tom Hanks character) is stranded alone on an island and must not only figure out a way to physically survive (external) but emotionally, as well (internal).



**Man vs God, Nature, or the Supernatural** includes any story that involves forces beyond man's control. Think of every ghost story you've ever read, every natural disaster movie you've watched, or every story that pits God against the Devil. A perfect example of this last one is the movie *The Omen*, where a young girl is possessed by a demon, and the family calls in a priest to perform an exorcism.

The book *Interview with a Vampire* is a good example of a supernatural conflict, while the movie *Dante's Peak* is an example of Man vs Nature. In this story, the inhabitants of Dante's Peak must fight to survive the eruption of a long-dormant volcano.

Don't gloss over conflict as you develop your story. Creating strong and believable conflict is absolutely essential because that's what creates tension, which is one of the main ingredients that will keep readers glued to the page.

## WAYS TO CREATE CONFLICT READERS LOVE

- Make the conflict personal. In other words, the conflict should threaten or at least test the protagonist's desire to achieve her main goal.
- Constantly ratchet up the tension. Conflict should steadily intensify as the story progresses. This means that one struggle should naturally lead to another as the story moves forward. This doesn't mean, however, that the conflict must lead to something as dramatic as the battle in *Star Wars*. For instance, in *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, Skeeter Phelan, the protagonist, returns from college and decides to write a book about racism in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi. She focuses on two African American maids and details their experiences raising white children while maintaining white households. There are no fistfights or light sabres. And yet, the conflict grows steadily as these women risk their safety and jobs in such an unforgiving environment.
- Use the story's setting: The setting itself can become the main character and challenge, or at least complicate, the protagonist's situation. In the movie *The Mountain Between Us*, two characters are stranded on a snow-covered mountain after their small plane crashes, and the pilot dies. The entire movie is about how they struggle against the elements to survive and their own emotions as they find themselves falling in love. In the movie *Insomnia*, a detective who has gone to Alaska to help with an investigation struggles with sleeplessness when faced with 24-hours of daylight, and how it begins to affect him physically and emotionally.

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## WRITING EXTERNAL CONFLICT

Remember that external conflict is your character against the rest of the world. Something or someone stands in the way of him achieving his goal. This conflict is the primary force moving the plot forward. An example would be the 2026 movie *Apex* starring Charlize Theron in which her character is being hunted in the Australian wilderness by a psychopathic killer.

### ***Key Strategies For Writing External Conflict***

1. Make sure you define clear stakes for your lead character. Your reader must understand the risk and what your character will lose if they fail.
2. Make the conflict as difficult as possible for your protagonist. Whether it's finding the courage to enter a swimming race (even though you can't swim well) because that's the only way you'll meet the girl of your dreams or you're already nervous about starting a new school only to become the target of the school bully. And then, once your character begins to make progress, pull the rug out from under them and make it worse.
3. Make the goal urgent, which will add tension. A simple way to do this is by introducing a ticking clock to raise urgency and force quick decision-making.
4. Link any external threats to the character's internal doubts, fears, or beliefs. An example would be the situation with the bully, which is the external threat, who exploits the character's insecurity at being in a new school (the internal threat).

## **WRITING INTERNAL CONFLICT**

Writing internal conflict is a bit more nuanced than writing external conflict, which is much more straightforward. When creating internal conflict, you need to consider a psychological, emotional, or moral struggle within the character, which then forces them to choose between competing desires, fears, or values. One of the best ways to do this is to anchor the conflict in the character's backstory, which may include past traumas, misbeliefs, or mistakes that shape how they act in the present.

## ***KEY STRATEGIES FOR WRITING INTERNAL CONFLICT***

- Force characters into scenarios where every choice they are forced to make has negative consequences, which then makes them weigh the outcomes.
- Push the character to choose between what they want vs what they actually need. In other words, a choice between a superficial goal and things like personal growth or redemption.
- Make your character choose between right and wrong. Although they know which choice is the morally correct choice, perhaps it's the most difficult choice or not what the character wants.
- Give your character two equally desirable goals and then force them to choose.
- Writing internal conflict is the perfect place to 'show' rather than 'tell.' Your goal is to reveal the character's inner struggles, and the best way to do that is by showing their physical reactions—clenched fists, tapping foot, shortness of breath, avoiding eye contact—along with some internal monologue.
- The inner conflict must link to the external conflict. An example would be a cop who returns from medical leave after being shot in the line of duty and is promoted to lead detective in a serial killer case. The external conflict is the killer he's trying to find, but the internal conflict is that he's now scared he won't be able to discharge his weapon if he were to face someone with a gun.

## **CAUTIONS**

There are a number of things to consider or be careful of as you create the conflict for your story. For instance:

- 1) Making the conflict too easy to resolve. If you have too few complications in the story or create a conflict that can be remedied too easily, your readers may roll their eyes and put the book down. Additionally, you'll have difficulty sustaining an easy to solve conflict throughout the entire story.
- 2) If you rely only on an external conflict (the erupting volcano), you risk your characters appearing one-dimensional.
- 3) You should understand the difference between an obstacle and a conflict. An obstacle is something you put in the way of your character, such as a mudslide they have to drive around.

- 4) A conflict is a challenge they have to think about, struggle with emotionally, and labor over making a difficult decision to resolve. For instance, an earthquake creates an emergency situation, but if the protagonist has a car and a clear road ahead, there's no conflict. On the other hand, if the lead character is disabled or gravely ill, then suddenly they have to *devise* a way to escape to survive.
- 5) Don't merely engineer a situation in order to create a conflict. Things that seem convenient or coincidental at the time may not play well with readers because they don't feel real. Remember! Your story wouldn't exist without the conflict, so make it core to the story.
- 6) Make sure you don't add instances where your lead character must face the conflict over and over just to fill space. Once again, the conflict(s) your character faces should grow out of the story and must advance the plot.
- 7) Be careful not to use *Deus ex machina* (God from the machine) when resolving the conflict. This is a Latin phrase that loosely means a plot device the author has used to have God or some other external force swoop in at the end to resolve a seemingly unsolvable problem. Readers want the protagonist to at least contribute to the resolution.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The goal in creating conflict is to make the outcome of the story uncertain so that readers are curious and interested enough to stay until the end. The secret to writing great conflict in fiction is to ensure that it arises naturally from deeply rooted character goals and the fear and/or stakes if the protagonist fails to achieve those goals. This forces your lead character to make difficult choices, which then drives the story forward. It's also important to pit a strong antagonist against a strong protagonist and incorporate both external obstacles and internal emotional battles.

Remember that the more difficult the choices you force your protagonist to face, the higher the stakes and the more interesting the story.

*Good luck!*

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After retiring from a 35+ year career in the nonprofit world, Ms. Bohart launched her own freelance writing company, Lil Dog Communications, and has had the privilege of writing for clients all over the world. She holds a master's degree in theater, has taught "Crafting the Story" through Green River College for 10+ years, and has written for both Patch.com and the Renton Reporter.

Currently, she has eleven paranormal mystery novels, two short story books, and three nonfiction books on Amazon. Visit her website to find free and low-cost tools for writers.

As a mystery and true crime aficionado, she has redesigned her author website into ***The No Alibi Zone*** to showcase criminal investigations. Her bi-monthly newsletter called "Let's Talk About Murder," includes blog posts and interviews with people who talk about, write about, and investigate crime as well as information on writing, her summit presentations, and her books. You can sign up to receive the newsletter for free by going here on her website: [Sign up here](#).

If you have questions or are interested in reaching out to Lynn, you may email her at [Lildog67@icloud.com](mailto:Lildog67@icloud.com). You can also visit her website at [www.lynnbohart-author.com](http://www.lynnbohart-author.com).

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