

Creating Conflict¹

1. Create inherently conflicting characters. You can create conflicting characters in an infinite number of ways, via:

- Opposing character traits – eg, aggressive, argumentative, a meditator, a conflict avoider;
- Race or nationality (for instance, characters from countries or regions which traditionally hate one another);
- Political or religious or moral or ethical views;
- Money, social status, upbringing, education, etc.

2. Create inherently conflicting groups. For instance, hunters and animal rights activists are bound to clash. Another conflict is between an individual's membership of the group and his own beliefs, values, and relationships with people outside the group (think: *How to Train Your Dragon*).

3. Give characters conflicting goals. The basis of any story is the hero's struggle to achieve a goal that he wants desperately, against an opponent who is determined to deny it to him. Make clear, early on:

- What your hero wants;
- Why he wants it so desperately. Make his motivation *primal*, i.e., about things that matter to every human being – survival, protection of loved ones, hunger, love, revenge, etc.;
- What's stopping him from getting it, and;
- What the (bad) consequences will be if he fails.

4. Force opposing characters together. You can both heighten and prolong conflict by tying two opposing characters together so they can't get away from one another: as cell mates, companions on a long trip, trapped in a submarine or spaceship, or in any other place from which they cannot escape. The two characters' differences may well be irreconcilable, yet in order to survive, or achieve their goals, they have to find ways to cooperate.

5. Raise the stakes. Readers won't be involved with the story until they know what the stakes are for your hero. Initially, the stakes were established when your hero formed her story goal. To heighten suspense, progressively raise the stakes through the story.

6. Create a power struggle. Power is a unique goal because it raises the stakes for both the winner (he can dictate the lives of others) and the loser (his life is dictated to). However power is no use in the abstract – it's only of value when there are people to exert power over.

Power struggles can involve several people competing to gain power, a character desperately clinging to power, or people struggling to escape oppression.

¹ From <https://www.ian-irvine.com/for-writers/article-5-how-to-create-conflict> which is adapted and expanded from Lukeman, *The Plot Thickens*. Adapted for class by Joseph Sigalas.

7. Use competition. The desire to win, to prove oneself the best, can drive a character more powerfully than the simple desire to achieve a goal, no matter what the goal is. And for both the winner and loser, competition is very revealing of character. Where two characters want the same prize, position, lover, or anything at all that two people can compete over, how do they compete?

8. Create time conflicts. Have two important or vital events occur in different places at the same time, so there is no way the character can be at both and has to make a difficult choice between them. Afterwards, depending on the consequences, he may be even more conflicted – he may have let people down who were depending on him. Or the choice he made for the best of reasons may have had disastrous consequences.

9. Family bonds. Relationships between friends, neighbours and colleagues may be short-lived, however family bonds are enduring and also offer unique sources of conflict.

10. Love and romance. Conflict is inherent in any romantic relationship, but it's likely to be magnified if the couple come from very different backgrounds, such as rich versus poor, religious versus non-religious, strict versus easy-going. Heighten conflict by creating barriers to the relationship – love between enemies, between a human and an alien, a lover with a dark past or terrible secret, or by using obstacles to keep the lovers apart.

11. Perspective. A person's attitude or perspective can create conflict where it did not exist. An embittered man who feels that nothing ever goes his way and everyone is against him will see conflict wherever he goes, and in every relationship he has. Conflict can also arise out of misunderstandings (one of the most common causes of conflict in sitcoms and romantic fiction).

12. Inner conflict. One of the best ways to create memorable and compelling characters, and an un-put-down-able story, is by giving them powerful inner conflicts. Whenever a reader experiences profound empathy for a character, it is because the character is in the throes of intense inner conflict. Inner conflict bonds the reader to the hero because the torment arising from his conflict confirms that he has a lot to lose. For example, the hero knows a secret that could win the war for his country, but if he reveals it, enemy agents will kill his family. What does he do?

13. Heighten and prolong conflict. Any conflict can be prolonged, and the major conflicts *should* be prolonged to rack up the tension – if you resolve a conflict too quickly, suspense disappears. However if a conflict is maintained too long without any hope of resolution, readers or viewers will tune out or give up (the *X-Files* and *Lost* TV series are good examples of conflicts maintained to the point of boredom).

14. Anticipation and expectation. The more your hero dwells on or worries about some forthcoming event (good or bad) the more conflicted she will feel when the event is about to occur, especially if the expectation is defeated in an unusual way.

15. Structure your story to heighten conflict.

Structure the beginning to initiate a strong conflict:

- Create a hero who is sympathetic and interesting

- Set out the story problem (i.e. the hero's goal) clearly, and why he *must* pursue this goal;
- Reveal the obstacle (an antagonist who's determined to prevent the hero from achieving his goal);
- Twist both these characters and the goal to break stereotypes, freshen the story and surprise the reader.

Through cause and effect, each scene must raise the stakes and bring the hero closer to her goals (both the story goal and her personal need), otherwise there's no point to the scene. A scene consists of a *stimulus* followed a *response*, repeated over and over. In detail it goes like this: *stimulus* leads to *emotion* leads to *thought* leads to *decision* leads to *action*. The hero's action soon leads to a *reaction* from her opponent, which is the stimulus that begins the next sequence.

In other words, in every scene the hero analyses her predicament and makes a decision she believes will help her – and this decision is always tested by the opponent's reaction in the next scene.

Keep raising the stakes until everything the hero has – his reputation, his life, his family, his country – is at risk, and his burden is unbearable.