

Creative Writing: The Secret to Creating Conflict¹

Note: Students, don't miss the homework assignment at the end of this reading!

We often think that to create conflict we need to show spectacular events. For example, a car chase, an argument between friends, a fistfight, or the threat of an explosion. Or we think of conflict as some kind of internal suffering: disappointment, sadness, or missing someone.

But the truth is that if events and emotions were the only elements of conflict in our stories, we'd have some pretty flat stories.

In good stories, conflict is not just about spectacular events or painful emotions.

Good conflict is about values.

What is a Value?

When you hear the word value in this context, you might think of “family values,” or in other words, morals. While morality is crucial to storytelling, that isn't the idea here.

Let's simplify it. A value is something you admire, something you want, something you love. Here are some examples of things you might value:

- God
- Kindness
- Money / Wealth
- Friends
- Your little brother
- Getting good grades
- Hunting
- Justice
- Compassion
- Tennis
- Power
- Humility

Think about a few of your favorite protagonists. What do they value?

For example, Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine in *Pride & Prejudice*, values honesty, humility, intelligence, kindness, and her family. Her conflict with Mr. Darcy is on the basis of these values. She thought he was dishonest, prideful, rude, and worst of all, he



¹ By Joseph Sigalas, adapted from [<http://thewritepractice.com/creating-conflict>].

“ruined the happiness of a most beloved sister.” Although both she and Mr. Darcy are “good” people, they nonetheless have a conflict, and this conflict drives the story.

In the *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy values fun and adventure, but above all she values loyalty and obedience to Aslan; Edmund values praise and Turkish delight candy.

How To Create Conflict in Your Story

To create conflict in your own story, ask yourself the following questions:

- What does your main character value above all?
- Do any of his values conflict with the values or actions of other characters?
- How can you reveal the conflicts in those values?
- Do any of his values conflict with *themselves*? (for example, wanting to stay out of trouble but also wanting to tell the truth)

A Note About Villains (Antagonists)

Although your story may not need a villain to have conflict, it’s often fun to have one. A villain is a character who has the **opposite values as those of your main character**.

For example, Batman values justice and order. The Joker values crime and chaos. Frodo values his friends and the peace of the Shire. Sauron values power at the cost of relationship and beauty.

To create the perfect villain, figure out what your main character values. Then, twist those values into some hideous shape and set the characters loose on each other.

HOMEWORK

Using a character you have created previously in this class, write a short story (at least two pages) in which you clearly reveal one of your character’s main values. Then bring that value into conflict, either with another positive value or by contradicting that value.