

CONFLICT, CONFLICT, CONFLICT

A daunting task perhaps, but every story's gotta have it; there's no story without it.

Readers look for it and won't read your book without it.



I know, I know, many of you might say you hate conflict, but like it or not, you do face it in your daily lives. Whether in real life or in writing, conflict can be minuscule or momentous; internal or external and funny or frightening. I know someone who often said that if she didn't get into a good old-fashioned fight at least once a week, well, then her week just wasn't a good one.

Think about what compels you to write (or read) your current book. There's likely a built-in conflict waiting to be written about in a manner that jumps off the page. There can and should be several conflicts within a novel. Each conflict can take on different time frames, different dilemmas, different stakes, and bring up vivid pictures with uncertain outcomes.

In literature, a conflict is a literary device characterized by a struggle between two opposing forces. Conflict provides crucial tension in any story and is used to drive the narrative forward. The conflict can be an internal one, external or most likely a blend of both.

Authors of all levels of success must ascertain how to write a compelling page so the reader will want to turn it to read what's going to happen next to the main character. The main question is, so what? How does an author entice the reader to care about the protagonist and garner sympathy? What does the protagonist want? And who (or what) is going to get in the way?

What makes for a good story? Sympathetic characters, who are engaged in a dramatic struggle, through which they are transformed. The two most important things that every story must have: 1) SOMETHING MUST HAPPEN; 2) CHARACTERS MUST HAVE FEELINGS; AND THEIR FEELINGS MUST CHANGE.

How do the protagonist's feelings change? How do you make your story plausible? This may well be where your research begins. Before an author writes his or her first page of a novel, due diligence must be given to the personalities of the main characters. This, as the author, is how you get to intimately know your characters. If you don't know them, you might write something 'uncharacteristic' about them, and this will make your writing appear inauthentic. The reader will catch this slip-up immediately, cast the book aside, and write the author off as not having any authority on the topic. Now, that's a conflict!

There are three general categories of conflict:

1. Societal Conflict – Several examples represent conflict within the society setting. One against many is a good way to consider your choices.
 - a. Perhaps your protagonist is fighting racism;
 - b. There've been many societal fights in recent years regarding vaccination requirements;
 - c. Women, historically and in present day, are protesting for women's equality;
 - d. Perhaps your protagonist is wrongly accused of something and is threatened with being ousted from society.
2. Interpersonal Conflict – This is usually assumed to be conflict between a protagonist and an antagonist. But don't forget that your protagonist can (and should) have conflicts with allies too.
 - a. Your protagonist should have some sort of conflict with every other person in your book;
 - b. Provide large or small examples of how your protagonist doesn't see eye to eye with others.
 - c. This is a frequently utilized device in fiction, pitting two characters against one another to move the plot along and provide the reader with a clear hero.
3. Internal Conflict – What is the main character's struggle?
 - a. This is why writing a character analysis is critical before your writing begins. What are his or her maladaptive traits?
 - b. What are his or her values and how will they be tested. What if a Catholic nun comes to the realization that she is pro-choice on abortion? Will she fight the Vatican? What if a nun makes public her knowledge of a pedophile priest? She could face being thrown out of the church; or societal humiliation.
 - c. Resolving internal conflicts requires courage. How will your character stand up to others in your book who want your character to be submissive?
 - d. What are the stakes? There always has to be stakes.
 - i. There can be several
 - ii. You can write in several small stakes
 - iii. There should be large stakes as well. The higher the stakes, the greater the drama and conflict. Could your character die if caught?

Mark Twin made famous the saying ‘Truth is greater than fiction.’ He added that it’s because fiction is obligated to consider the possibilities; truth isn’t.

I don’t know about you, but when I think back over my life and the conflicts I’ve lived or known of, I coin another phrase, “You can’t make this stuff up.” One only has to read the headlines. As a financial educator, I can’t hardly pick up a weekly newsletter without reading about a financial planner who has been arrested for embezzlement.

Non-fiction books are top sellers, and for good reason. Who could have ever thought up airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center? And what about celebrities who are caught and going on trial for committing unthinkable crimes against other humans?

I’m not suggesting that fiction writers turn to non-fiction, but we only have to do a little research in order to ignite our imagination when tackling that next short story or novel.

In closing, here are a few notable quotes to get you thinking:

“When introverts are in conflict with each other...it may require a map in order to follow all the silences, nonverbal cues and passive-aggressive behaviors!” Adam S. McHugh

“First they ignore you, then they attack you and want to burn you. And then they build monuments to you.” Nicholas Klein

And my favorite, from Rodney Dangerfield in the very funny movie, Back to School. While explaining his relationship to his ex-wife to someone, Rodney says, “My wife was an earth sign, I was a water sign. Together we made mud.”