

Conflict in Creative Writing

The Art of Keeping Readers Hooked



Picture this: you're watching a movie, reading a book, or even listening to an epic bedtime story. What keeps you glued, turning pages, gnawing at your nails, dying to know what happens next? The answer, dear writer-in-the-making, lies in *conflict*. But before you start imagining explosions, yelling matches, or duels to the death, let's take a step back. Conflict in creative writing isn't just about fights or obvious challenges—it's about tension, uncertainty, and the profound pull of unanswered questions.

In this article, we're going to break down the concept of conflict in storytelling. We'll explore its traditional forms, its broader interpretations, and practical ways you can harness it to elevate your craft. So, grab your metaphorical pen (or keyboard), and let's dive in.

What Is Conflict in Storytelling?

If you've ever taken a creative writing class or read a "writing tips" blog, you've probably encountered the classic definitions of conflict. Traditionally, conflict is described as any obstacle preventing a character from achieving their goal. It's the clash between characters, internal dilemmas, or even forces of nature.

Here's the kicker: while this definition works, it can feel limited. If all conflicts look the same—an outer struggle or inner angst—stories risk feeling repetitive or stale. After all, not every tale needs a villain twirling a mustache or a protagonist stuck in an existential crisis.

Let's expand the horizon: Conflict can be anything that creates tension by leaving the story's resolution in doubt. It's about that little voice in the reader's head, asking, *Will they succeed? What happens next?*

Traditional Conflict: The Classics

Let's start with the types of conflict most writers are taught:

1. Character vs. Character

This is the bread and butter of many stories. Two characters with opposing goals collide. Think Harry Potter and Voldemort or Katniss Everdeen and President Snow. The stakes are high, emotions run hotter, and readers are riveted.

2. Character vs. Environment

Here, the antagonist isn't a person but the world itself. A climber scaling Mount Everest must battle nature's extremes. A team of astronauts stranded on Mars? Same deal. In these stories, the environment presents a physical (or symbolic) force the character must overcome.

3. Character vs. Self

Ah, the internal struggle. This is the domain of personal demons, insecurities, and moral dilemmas. Stories like this force characters—and readers—to look inward. What

should they prioritize? What flaws do they need to overcome? Think Hamlet, torn between action and inaction.

Expanding the Definition: Beyond Fights and Obstacles

If there's one thing the traditional model misses, it's the subtler, less overt conflicts that can also hook your readers. Let's talk about *tension*—a broader and, dare I say, more versatile interpretation of conflict.

The Tension-Conflict Connection

Think of tension as the invisible string you, the writer, pull tighter and tighter as the story progresses. It keeps readers on edge, not necessarily through fights or setbacks, but through uncertainty. Conflict is what a character faces; tension is how it makes the reader *feel*.

Here are a few tension-building tools that don't rely on traditional clashes:

1. Secrets and Questions

Introduce unanswered questions early in your story. For example, why does a character refuse to talk about their past? Why does their neighbor always draw their curtains at night? Curiosity becomes a subtle but persistent source of tension.

2. Subtle Emotional Unease

A couple preparing for dinner can feel perfectly ordinary. But add tiny, inexplicable details—an uneaten plate of food or one avoiding eye contact—and suddenly, readers are straining to figure out what's really going on.

3. Philosophical or Moral Questions

What happens when a story's conflict lies entirely in differing views or ideologies? Good science fiction (like Ray Bradbury or Margaret Atwood's works) thrives on presenting moral dilemmas that make characters question everything. The tension is in the *thinking*.

Reader vs. Story: A Revolutionary Take on Conflict

Here's where things get fun. What if conflict isn't confined to your characters? What if the real struggle lies between your *story and your readers*?

This approach invites you to stop thinking only about what characters are doing and start crafting experiences that play with your audience's expectations. Tension can occur when the audience leans in, wondering *Why does this matter?* or *What aren't they telling me?*

Consider a slow, deliberate scene where almost nothing “happens.” A character walks down the same street every day for a week. It's mundane on the surface—but then you drop subtle breadcrumbs. Maybe every day, they react slightly differently to a storefront. Maybe they're holding something precious they won't explain. The reader's brain fills in the gaps: *What's going on? What changes for this person tomorrow?*

When Conflict Meets Culture: Non-Western Perspectives

Western storytelling traditions love action. High-stakes battles, big conflicts, explosive climaxes—they dominate Hollywood blockbusters and bestselling novels alike. But storytelling doesn't look the same everywhere.

Take the Japanese *kishōtenketsu* structure. Unlike the Western model (introduction, rising action, climax, resolution), *kishōtenketsu* doesn't prioritize conflict. Instead, it hinges on surprise through revelation, where new twists or perspectives at the midpoint shift everything.

Here's a quick example:

- A man waters his garden every day.
- He pauses to admire a single flowerpot.
- We learn this flower was grown from seeds his late wife left behind.

The “conflict” isn't external but internal, between what's *seen* and what's *felt*. It's *his* unspoken grief that engages us.

Want to experiment? Try writing tension-rich scenes where the reader isn't waiting for a climax—they're waiting to *understand*.

Practical Tips to Add Conflict and Tension in Your Writing

Still with me? Wonderful. Let's get practical. Whether you're working on a moody literary short story or an action-packed thriller, you can apply these techniques to up your storytelling game.

1. Ask Questions, Don't Answer Them (Right Away)

Good stories keep readers guessing. Instead of resolving character goals immediately, dangle them just out of reach. Revising a scene? Ask yourself:

- What would happen if I withheld this piece of information?
- Is there a secret the reader can sense but doesn't know yet?

2. Let Readers Do the Work

Ever heard the advice “show, don't tell”? It's not just about visuals. It's about creating active readers. Don't tell them a character is sad—show the half-eaten dinner plate, the unopened voicemail, the stashed photo of a friend they never mention.

Instead of stating answers outright, give readers the evidence to figure things out for themselves. You'll build an irresistible web of tension.

3. Slow It Down

When we think “page-turner,” we often think fast action. But sometimes, slowing the pace is more effective. Use calmer moments to deepen reader curiosity or set future expectations. For example:

- A quiet dinner scene foreshadowing an impending betrayal.
- A letter left unopened, building curiosity until its reveal chapters later.

4. Experiment with Forms

If your current draft feels stale, play! Write a scene guided by tension, not plot. Forget about obstacles. Instead, craft uncertainty. A character walking through an eerie, empty house, the light flickering. No jump scares needed—just the promise of one.

5. Layer Your Tension

Who says you have to choose only one source of conflict? Imagine a character trying to repair a relationship (*external conflict*) while secretly doubting their own worth (*internal conflict*). Add in the pressure of a clock ticking down until they leave town. Layered tension equals multi-dimensional storytelling.

Why It All Matters

At the heart of all storytelling lies one purpose: to make readers *feel*. Conflict—be it big and dramatic or subtle and simmering—is a writer's greatest tool to achieve this. But as you've seen, "conflict" can mean so much more than we're traditionally taught.

Parting Thoughts: The Power of Subtle Conflict

As writers, it's tempting to treat conflict as a cornerstone that requires explosions, sword fights, or earth-shattering moments. But the truth is, the most memorable and meaningful stories often hide their conflicts in quieter, subtler corners of human experience. A lingering glance, a forgotten promise, an unanswered question—these can be just as powerful as any climax.

Here's your challenge: think about how you can weave tension into your work—not just tension between characters, but tension between the story and the reader. Remember, your goal as a storyteller is to keep your audience engaged, curious, and emotionally invested.

So, before you throw in that next argument or battle scene because your story feels "slow," take a step back. Ask yourself instead, *What questions can I leave unanswered?* or *How can I make the reader wonder why this moment matters?*

In the end, conflict—whether it's bold and brash or soft and subtle—isn't about what happens on the page. It's about what happens in the hearts and minds of your readers.