The Story - Conflict and Motivation

There are three things a story requires: *exposition, development and drama*. You can know that the plot portion at the beginning of your story is strong if you can summarize it in three lines, with each line relating to one of these elements. This test can help you determine if you have established a routine or the mood of a *normal day*, created a compelling disruption, and given your protagonist something to struggle for.

Note the following example:

Exposition: John Brown was the only Lawyer in the little town of Cushman.

Development: One day, Mrs. Brown told him that she was leaving him for another man.

Drama: "You'll do nothing of the kind," he said.

In line one, the *exposition*; the reader learns the story is about John Brown, what John does for a living: he's a Lawyer and where he lives. From that information, the reader can form a reasonably accurate impression of John's relative income and social standing. From all the information, the reader can grasp by intuition a routine: a *normal day* in the married life of a small town attorney.

In line two, the *development*, the reader sees the inciting incident of the story – the disruption of the routine, and knows what's at stake in the story: a marriage and everything connected with the marriage – the routine, the reputation, the self-esteem and perhaps a career.

In line three, the *drama*, the reader learns what the protagonist will struggle for: the marriage. John wants to restore the order – the routine – that's been disrupted.

One of the most important questions is what does the character want? This question should be followed by what's in the way of the character getting it. You can already answer those questions about John: John wants to save his marriage and the routine that it represents. What's in the way of him getting that? It's Mrs. Brown.

If you try to create an exposition line for your manuscript (blank is a blank in blank) and you can't come up with the information to fill in the blanks, then your story has a problem with exposition. The reader needs to know something about the characters and the story's world to appreciate fully the struggle the characters are about to undergo.

When assessing development, if you can't find one day or the one time that something happened to disrupt the routine, you might have a problem with plotting. Instead of a piece that moves dramatically, a piece in which a character struggles for something, you might just have a series of routines without drama.

If you come up blank for drama or the drama seems vague, then you story has a problem with conflict and motivation.

If your story withstands the exposition, development drama test, then you are probably well on the way to telling a solid story.

Conflict

The story doesn't start until something goes wrong…

You've set up the conditions of a normal day in the life of your protagonist. You have shown his profile and alluded to his goal in life. He is happy in his normal day. Although your writing might be elegant and mildly entertaining, your story hasn't started. His possessions, his way of life are not in jeopardy and his goal has not been challenged. His normal day is intact until something goes wrong and disrupts it.

Conflict and struggle creates a dramatic question, something like, "Is he going to make it?" or, "Is she going to get the man of her dreams? By putting your protagonist's fate in doubt, you make the reader ask, "What happens next" as they keep turning the pages. The intensity of the conflict depends on the potency your protagonist's desire as well as the strength of the opposition.

The Six kinds of story conflicts

1. Person against person

This is the most common type of conflict both in fiction and in life, and it can form the basis of the main conflict in your story. Alternately, you might have a series of smaller *person against person* conflicts that may be part of the larger conflict.

Person against person conflicts have a number of interesting possibilities. In a person against person conflict, the two people who are in conflict may be on opposite sides of an issue, but there may be no clear right or wrong, or both sides may believe themselves to be in the right. This can make for complex and challenging storytelling.

On the other hand, a story with an obvious and unambiguous villain can be fun to read and write. Both approaches are legitimate ways to develop conflict.

Most stories that have other types of conflicts as their main conflict may also have person versus person conflicts. People tend to complicate things wherever they go

and whatever they do. In fact, if your story feels light on narrative drive and conflict, introducing a person against person subplot may be an effective way to better develop it.

If the conflict in your story is between many people, the conflict may instead be person against society.

2. Person against nature

A protagonist who is lost in the woods or who is under attack by wild animals or who is fighting to survive a terrible storm is in a person against nature conflict. For example Robinson Crusoe.

Note that the type of conflict does not dictate the genre of the story. It could be a horror story or an adventure story about an American frontier family. Protagonists in person against nature stories sometimes have a secondary conflict of *person against self.*

3. Person against self

Some protagonists are struggling largely with inner conflicts.

Person against self is a common secondary conflict in much fiction. It is not uncommon for a protagonist to be struggling with some aspect of self-sabotage. The character might be struggling with fear, a difficult past, an addiction or a tendency to keep choosing the wrong relationships. Even if this is not the main conflict of the story, a *person against self* conflict can add significant depth and complexity to your book.

However, some characters are defined by their self-assuredness. No readers want to see the unflappable Miss Marple undergoing a great inner struggle or crisis of confidence.

4. Person against society

Some characters are not fighting a single antagonist but a whole group of antagonist. Sometimes they may be fighting their entire community.

To Kill a Mockingbird, a story that features a lawyer in a small American Southern town in the 1930s defending a black man against a false charge of rape, is an example of this type of conflict because the lawyer is in conflict with nearly everyone in their small community.

Because society is made up of individuals, this type of conflict will also include significant elements of person against person. However, when the person against person conflicts include conflicts against entire systems and ways of life, the overarching conflict becomes one of person against society.

5. Person against the supernatural

The supernatural might here be considered a broad term that also covers conflicts against any unknown entity as well as fate and gods. A story of a man's efforts to escape his fate and is a person against the supernatural story.

Stories in which characters are facing ghosts or demons if those entities are not too human-like would fit in this category as would stories about any kind of inexplicable antagonist. Therefore, a story like The Birds would fall under this conflict and not person against nature because the birds in that story are clearly not acting in a normal fashion.

Conflicts against aliens might be classed as conflicts against the supernatural or as person against person depending on the powers the aliens possess. In a science fiction story where humans and aliens are on roughly equal footing, the aliens might be considered the same as people for the sake of the conflict.

6. Person against technology

As our lives become more dependent upon and vulnerable to technology, the use of this as a conflict is likely to grow. However, we can actually look back hundreds of years to perhaps the earliest story in which this was the central conflict. Frankenstein tells the story of a creature created through scientific means, and thus it is a classic example of the person versus technology conflict.

However, this is not a theme that is strictly for the science fiction genre. A thriller might deal with a protagonist who is struggling to contain a piece of rogue technology or cyber attacks. Protagonists might have to pilot a crippled plane or survive a submarine explosion.

Multiple conflicts

Most stories feature one of six main central conflicts at their cores with smaller conflicts along the way. However, some stories are so big that they contain multiple major conflicts. For example, in Stephen King's story The Stand, much of humanity is wiped out by a virus, but this is not just a story about person versus nature. It is also person versus person and person versus supernatural.