

Chapter 9

CONFLICT, CRISIS, DRAMA, AND TENSION

Conflict builds character. Crisis defines it.

—Steven Thulon

Without conflict, crisis, drama, and tension, a story would be nothing but a string of boring facts—if every scene was peaceful, comfortable, and pleasurable, no one would read it. This may sound overly simplified, but most great stories involve a protagonist desperately wanting something but unable to get it due to something or someone getting in the way and causing trouble.

Conflict, crisis, drama, and tension define the characters and **set them in motion to make choices and act in ways that reveal things about themselves, not only propelling the story, but giving power to it.**

Readers prefer fiction with conflict, crisis, drama, and tension for the **satisfaction and reward they can feel at the end, and in order for a writer to accomplish this, he or she has to** capture the reader's attention, touch the reader's emotions, and make readers care about the protagonist. All this can be accomplished through the right amount of conflict, crisis, drama, and tension.

Some would argue that the story doesn't begin until there is conflict, crisis, drama, or tension—that they are the driving forces that move the story forward and entice the reader to keep turning pages. I tend to believe this as well.

Conflict

Two types of conflict exist that you can include in your novel: internal and external.

Internal conflict is the dilemma a character faces inside of himself or herself. For example, the dilemma might be one that requires a character to choose whether to compromise his or her ethical standards. Shakespeare was a genius in doing this, as in *Hamlet*, whose title character struggles with carrying out his father's ghost's order to kill his uncle.

External conflict is in the obstacles the character encounters during the course of the novel. An example of this is the conflict between Harry Potter and Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

One way to introduce conflict into your novel is to find the main character's greatest weakness and attack it. Stomp on it. Beat it down. Then kick it. And when you're finished, kick it again one last time for good measure. Lisa Duffy does this extremely well in *The Salt House*, in which Jack and Hope Kelly, just when their emotions are explosively high following the death of their young daughter, experience a series of events that threaten their marriage and business.

Conflict can be defined as disagreement, contradiction, opposition, clash, fight, battle, struggle, strife, controversy, quarrel, discord, antagonism, collision, incompatibility, or interference. There are arguably four basic types of conflict:

Man Against Himself (internal conflict). This may involve emotional issues, desires, difficult choices, expectations, fears, personal crossroads, addictions, and ethics. Internal conflict is featured prominently in the following novels:

The Call of the Wild by Jack London, in which the protagonist (in this case, a dog) is torn between his domesticated and wild self.

The Giver by Lois Lowry, in which twelve-year-old Jonas explores the importance of free will as he struggles with whether or not to accept the sheltered and narrow-minded beliefs of others.

Human Against Human (external conflict). This is often a typical protagonist-versus-antagonist situation involving physical or emotional conflict. Human-against-human conflict is featured in the following stories:

The Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum, in which Dorothy struggles with the Wicked Witch of the West.

Star Wars by George Lucas, in which Luke Skywalker fights with nemesis Darth Vader.

Human Against Society (external conflict). This may include the government, culture, civil rights, religion. You will find human-against-society conflict in the following novels:

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee, in which lawyer Atticus Finch strives to prove the innocence of a young black man accused of raping a white woman.

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury, in which fireman Guy Montag is forced to set fire to homes that are found to contain books, which have been declared illegal by the authorities.

Human Against Nature (external conflict). This may involve natural disasters, illness, fire, environmental issues. Human-against-nature conflict is featured in the following novels:

Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer, in which young Christopher McCandless leaves a privileged life to become a back-to-nature wanderer.

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway, in which a Cuban fisherman engages in a tortuous battle with a giant fish in the middle of the Gulf Stream.

This is not to say the story line cannot include more than one conflict, and, in fact, a great novel will include many conflicts, both internal and external. The challenge is to make them work together to create a cohesive plot. This can be accomplished by making the conflicts oppose the protagonist's goal(s) or motivation toward reaching these goal(s). For example, if your character's goal is to beat his drug addiction (internal conflict), pressure from his druggie buddies to hang with them and his need to sell drugs in order to pay off drug debts (external conflicts) would make it difficult for him to turn things around for himself.

The central focus of a novel needs to be on how the protagonist overcomes conflict to achieve his or her goal—whether it's internal conflict, external conflict, or (more likely) a combination of the two—with each instance of conflict taking the protagonist further from the goal. Then, in the end, the protagonist needs to evolve—to grow in some way—as a result of the conflict faced. Otherwise, there is no purpose to the story.

Crisis

Crisis can be defined as a major turning point in a sequence of events, a condition that leads to a decisive change, an upheaval in a person's life, or the point at which tension is at the highest. Examples include a serious car crash intentionally caused by someone close to the protagonist, a debilitating illness, loss of a loved one, an unexpected divorce, a declaration of war.

The story's crisis is the moment when your protagonist is placed into such a tight spot that he or she *has* to make a decision from which there is no turning back—the do-or-die moment. The crisis of a story is what the reader has been waiting for. Here are some examples of compelling crisis points in fiction.

- In *Star Trek: The Next Generation* by Gene Roddenberry when the *Enterprise* is attacked by the slime monster.
- In John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* when Lennie kills Curley's wife.
- In *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare when Romeo kills Tybalt and realizes he has sealed his own fate.
- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker when Mister separates Celie from her beloved Nettie.

If you have successfully woven crisis into your story, readers will wonder how the character will get out of the situation—what decisions are made, how the main character handles himself or herself, how other characters react, etc. Readers will have to know what happens next.

Drama

When we think of drama, we think of something intense, exciting, striking, or vivid in some way. In fiction, drama is created through dialogue, internal thoughts, character action, or the lack thereof by a series of events having an intense emotional effect.

Drama may take any number of forms—comedy, tragedy, social/political, fantasy, surprise, delight, disappointment, suspense—and may be shown by creating a single intense action-packed scene or a series of minor ones. It can be subtle or in-your-face. It doesn't have to be fast-paced—slowing down the action to create drama can be just as effective.

Creating drama in your story will serve no purpose unless you include the effect that it has on the character. Never leave the reader wondering why you included it.

Here are some excerpts that depict drama.

- From Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*:
Self-imposed incarceration and starvation is a particularly slow and excruciating way to expire, even if you do find yourself in the throes of delirium. Love hurts, Catherine, but is haunting your beloved Heathcliff until his death really the best way to appease your suffering?
- From *Appointment by Death* by Agatha Christie:
"You do see, don't you, that she's got to be killed?" The question floated out into the still night air, seemed to hang there a moment and then drift away down into the darkness toward the dead sea.
- From Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:
We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive ..." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?"
- From David Peace's *Occupied City*:
In the wintertime, papers in your arms, through this January night, down these Tokyo streets, you are running from the scene of the crime; from the snow and from the mud, from the bank and from the bodies; running from the scene of the crime and from the words of the book; words that first enticed and entranced you, then deceived and defeated you, and now have left you in-snared and in-prisoned—

Here are some ways to include drama in your narrative.

Don't tell all. Leave something to the reader's imagination by not giving out all the details. Tease them by alluding to (rather than revealing) something.

Use misinformation. Have a character receive some faulty information to confuse or misguide him or her.

Hold back. Keep the protagonist wanting—with his or her goal just out of reach—for as long as you can.

Create imperfect characters. Allow your characters to make mistakes that lead them in the wrong direction.

Start at the end. If the ending of your story contains the most drama, consider starting there. Then, pull the rest of the story into it.

Create a hidden agenda for the antagonist. Let the reader think in the beginning that the opposing character's purpose is something different.

Create obstacles. Force your characters to face something unexpected to create setbacks for them.

Play around with character. Create a surprising change in values, morals, or beliefs for one of your characters—something the reader would not have expected.

Amp it up. Make your protagonist's goals loftier, the risks associated with them greater, and the roadblocks harder to overcome.

Consider death. There being no greater drama in life than death, if it enhances the story, consider fitting it in.

Give and take. Try giving your characters what they desire most, and then take it away.

Sow family discord. Reading about happy families is boring. Family discord is always a good source for drama—try betrayal, scapegoating, favoritism, jealousy, or abuse.

Drama is a vital ingredient for all good stories—those uneasy moments that eventually crest excite readers and cause them to read on. The right balance of drama and exposition is critical to captivate your readers.

Tension

With Latin roots, the word “tension” stems from “tendere,” which means to stretch. Tension occurs when something is stretched either physically or emotionally.

In the health-care industry, tension is referred to as a psychological or physical condition—associated with conflict, disparity, instability, or uncertainty—created by a need or desire to resolve a discomfort between two or more forces. Emotional tension can lead to physical tension, leading to symptoms, such as an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of the stomach, stiff muscles, or painful joints. Similarly, in fiction, tension is the element that evokes emotions, such as worry, anxiety, fear, unhappiness, uncertainty, and stress on the part of the characters, and if done well, the readers too.

Tension is most often associated with psychological or emotional factors, such as those mentioned above, but can also be associated with physical factors, such as illnesses or disorders. Tension is often driven by conflict, crisis and drama and is most effective in writing when it starts out slow and rises up to the crisis point of the story. The right balance of tension throughout the narrative will cause readers to become emotionally invested in the story and incited to keep reading.

The good thing about tension for writers is that it can manifest itself in so many different ways. Tension can occur in almost any situation—any event, conversation, or thought can inspire tension. It can be conveyed in a loud and obnoxious manner or in a quiet and restrained one. It can be obvious on the page or inferred by the narrative.

While each instance will be different depending on the situation, most tension-filled moments fit into one or more of the following five categories.

Between People

In real life, tension at some level exists in every relationship, as it's rare for people to always get along without experiencing any problems. Accordingly, in fiction, characters who have perfect, flawless relationships are unbelievable and furthermore are likely not being used to their fullest potential. (See Chapter 3, for more on character development.) Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* is a good example of tension in fiction. In this story, the teenage son of staunch conservative parents moves in with their ultraliberal next-door neighbors, causing extreme tension among family members as they try to find ways to get along.

Extenuating Circumstances

Tension can stem from any number of extenuating circumstances—poverty, tragedy, social/political injustice, the environment, to name just a few—causing problems for the protagonist that are beyond his or her control. Imagined circumstances can also create tension for a character, and when unknown consequences are added, tension is amped up. Social injustice, for example, is the theme in *The Girl Who Played with Fire* by Steig Larsson, in which the

protagonist is accused of three murders based on extenuating circumstances, and there is tension among the accused, the investigator, and people from the accused's past.

Task-Related

Some tasks—whether dictated by other characters/circumstances or self-inflicted—can cause tension for the protagonist in multiple ways. Aside from the obvious problem(s) associated with not completing an important task, tension may also come about from not finishing a task on time, doing it wrong, or unexpected ramifications from completing it. In Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, the protagonist's key task is to compile a book of stories about the lives of black maids in the South. The author skillfully advances the tension surrounding this task with a series of incidents that prohibit her from completing the book.

Surprises

A surprise in the narrative will undoubtedly add tension to the situation. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins shocks readers with the notion that elders in the society send their children to fight one another to the death and call it a game.

Mysteries

Mysteries—even secondary ones embedded in non-mystery genres—add tension to a story. Mysteries provide puzzles to solve and allow readers to vicariously experience the darker side of life. Richard Powers creates serious tension between siblings in his novel *The Echo Maker*, in which Mark Schluter is involved in a near-fatal accident and calls upon his estranged sister to nurse him back to health. The tension Mark feels stems from his belief that even though she resembles, acts, and sounds just like his sister, she is really someone else, and the tension she feels stems from his refusal to recognize her.

Many storytelling methods can be used to create tension:

- Foreshadowing (hinting at something that will happen later)
- Withholding information, especially in mysteries
- Creating a “ticking time bomb”
- Placing cliff-hangers at the ends of chapters
- Setting up a dangerous environment
- Separating the protagonist from his or her comfort zone
- Creating character isolation
- Showing emotional loss
- Crafting forceful dialogue
- Creating disasters
- Having characters search for or discover something difficult
- Showing unpredictable behavior
- Delaying the action, slowing the pace
- Raising the stakes
- Creating a dramatic atmosphere and mood
- Implanting flashbacks
- Inserting plot twists and interesting revelations
- Introducing unexpected characters

Tension is all about unanswered questions that keep the reader wanting to read further and well-timed moments that shake things up a bit. But once you create tension in the story, don't forget to release it at some point, acknowledging that the cause of the tension has passed.

Tension is a great tool, and the more imaginative you can be as the writer, the more effective it will be.

Suggested Reading:

Coles, William. Story in Literary Fiction (blog): *Drama*. <https://www.storyinliteraryfiction.com/essays-on-writing/drama/>.

Irving, Ian. Ian Irving (blog): *60 Ways to Create and Heighten Conflict*. <https://www.ian-irvine.com/for-writers/article-5-how-to-create-conflict/>.

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Thomas, Sophie. "How to Hook Readers with a Great Crisis." Story Grid. (No date.) <https://storygrid.com/hook-readers-great-crisis/>.