Understanding Conflict & Tension

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Frodo tries to keep his mission and identity hidden, but fails dramatically.

The words "conflict" and "tension" are casually thrown around in most discussions of storytelling. They're common storytelling concepts, but they don't mean exactly what they do in everyday speech. That can make it easy to misinterpret what they are, and in turn misapply them to stories. So, if you haven't gotten a formal introduction to conflict and tension, here's what you need to know.

Conflict Is the Pursuit of a Goal

Usually, conflict is defined as an intense physical or verbal fight. Conflict in a story can manifest that way, but it doesn't always. What's important is the motivations of the character(s) involved. They must want something. That desire translates into an immediate goal: something they want to accomplish in the scene. Perhaps they're trying to open a portal to the 1980s, or just get to sleep. It can be anything that matters to them, but without it, there is no conflict.

Regardless of whether they achieve their goal, conflict manifests when they are trying, but the audience doesn't know if they'll succeed or fail. To create that uncertainty, something must threaten their efforts. In storytelling, we refer to this something as the antagonist. The antagonist could be another person with a mutually exclusive goal, like two knights in the a duel or two

runners in a race. Or it could be bad weather, their own fear, or a series of unlucky circumstances.

Even if there's a physical fight, the characters must have meaningful goals tied to it, or it isn't a conflict in the storytelling sense. Two people who fight each other just because they're drunk and feel like fighting don't have anything to gain or lose by besting one another. Their punches will be relegated to mere flavor in any story their fight appears in.

Conflict Is Important When Stakes Are High

On the reverse side, a conflict becomes more important to the story if the characters have everything to gain or lose by it. When storytellers increase the consequences of loss or success, we call it "raising the stakes." Let's look at our two drunk fighters again. Their fight will be more important if:

1. Both of them are sure they can beat anyone in a brawl, and they boasted to each other before the fight. Now their pride is at stake.
2. Each has bet several thousand dollars on the fight. That will raise the stakes further – but only if that money means something to the characters and the audience. One of the fighters could need it to receive medical treatment, and the other is trying to pay back the money they owe to a dangerous loan shark.
3. They're in a gladiator's arena, and it's a life or death match. We can also put the health and safety of other people on the line. Perhaps one is a cop protecting a witness who will testify against a mob boss, and the other is an assassin sent by the mob boss. That gives us a bonus stake: if the witness dies, the mob boss could go free.
4. One of the fighters is an Elder God who will destroy all of humanity, and the other is a former cultist who is desperately trying to banish it before it does. Now the fate of the world is decided by the outcome of this battle.

Most stories will benefit if the stakes are raised. However, there are a few pitfalls in raising them too high. First, if you have high stakes for most of your scenes, your story might feel melodramatic. Second, if you have high stakes and you aren't willing to give your story a tragic ending, the audience could call your bluff. For conflict to be effective, they must believe it could go either way.

Conflict Is Called Tension When It's Covert

Characters aren't always open about their goals. Sometimes they try to achieve them while keeping their motives secret. This creates a more subtle effect called tension.

A great example is two would-be lovers who meet for the first time. They each want to impress the other, but neither wants to let on they're trying. While they're covertly aiming for a positive impression, they'll try to find out if the other person is available and interested in them. Again, without their crush knowing they made an effort to find out.

Let's take another situation. We have a scene with a boss and an employee. The boss says something the employee strongly disagrees with. The employee wants to correct them, but doing so openly could get them fired. Instead, they might carefully chose their words to steer their boss in the right direction, while making it sound like a casual observation. Perhaps they even use reverse psychology.

In these situations, characters aren't spelling out their goals. A scene with tension may resemble a typical conversation between friends. But the audience will still sense the conflict, and weigh the chance of success or failure. That makes even small talk engaging.

Conflict Is Essential to Scenes

Conflict is the primary source of entertainment in stories. Without it, scenes are boring. If you have any scenes in your story that don't have conflict, ask yourself why you included them. Chances are good that you designed them to pass information to the audience. That doesn't usually work, because without conflict, the audience has little reason to care about your information.

Information bestowing scenes only work if:

1. They are short, more like quick snapshots or pan-overs than full scenes.
2. They reveal information that is critical to the plot and characters that have already been introduced.

If you have a quick scene where your [mysterious villain](#) reveals his true identity over the lifeless body of a sidekick that was alive minutes earlier, then okay. You don't need conflict there. Your audience will be busy re-evaluating everything that's happened, imagining the conflict that took place off screen, and anticipating a new threat to the protagonist.

Otherwise [add conflict](#) into that scene, or [cut it out](#).

Conflict Should Vary Across Scenes

There are a few considerations when looking at all of the conflicts in your story together. Mainly, your conflicts should be varied. If the stakes are always high, or always low, or they always manifest as tension, or they're all overt, your audience could get bored. Variety is the spice of life; sprinkle it liberally throughout your scenes.

Give your story a nice arc by raising the stakes as it progresses. Look for ways to invigorate your final battle. If you have critical conflicts early, tone them down to give your plot room to build. As you go through your story, turn the heat up by two degrees, then cool it down by one, then raise it by two more, and so on. Save the highest stakes for your climax.

Conflict and tension are the keys to keeping your audience engrossed in your story. But they appear in a multitude of forms, so it can take practice to understand them and incorporate them into your work. Next time you're watching a favorite movie or reading a favorite book, ask yourself what the characters want in each scene, and whether they get it. It could give you some great inspiration for the next story you create.