

**WRITERS' EASY GUIDE**

# Chain of Conflict

**Connect the Links to Keep  
A Reader Hooked**

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EPS  
The Empty Page Society

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## **Connect the Links to Keep a Reader Hooked**

If you're writing a mystery, the primary conflict involves solving the mystery. If you're writing a romance, the primary conflict is the relationship between the hero and heroine. Many other conflicts may exist in the story, but the primary conflict forms a unified chain, and like links in a chain, one piece of the conflict should not end without another already in place. That is, if you want to keep the reader hooked.

*Let's look at a familiar  
story, **Gone With The  
Wind.***

- Scarlet sees Rhett at a party. They share a long, sexually charged stare, each obviously intrigued with the other. But Rhett is a man of questionable repute (conflict) and Scarlet is in love with Ashley Wilkes (conflict). This attraction does not resolve itself before...
- Scarlet makes a fool of herself begging Ashley to declare his love and not to marry his cousin Melanie. Rhett, lying out of sight on a sofa, hears it all. When Ashley leaves, Rhett makes himself known to

Scarlet. She's furious (conflict) that he overheard. He's intrigued (conflict) with her fire and flagrant disregard for social mores. Though obviously attracted to one another...

- Scarlett, seeing Ashley kiss Melanie before riding off to enlist in the war, coaxes a proposal of marriage from Charles Hamilton and marries him (conflict) out of spite.
- Charles dies of measles before going to war, leaving Scarlet a widow. While this might seem the perfect time for her to fall into Rhett's arms, she still pines for Ashley (conflict) and moves to Atlanta to live with Melanie. Rhett accurately interprets her ulterior motive: to be close when Ashley returns.
- At a ball to raise funds for the war effort, Rhett bids a scandalous \$150 to dance the Virginia Reel with Scarlet. As a widow, she is not expected to accept (conflict), but she's bored with widowhood and does accept, causing Aunt Pitty to faint.
- This, too, seems the perfect time for Scarlet to own up to her attraction to Rhett. During the dance, Rhett tells Scarlet, "Someday, I want you to say to me the words I heard you say to Ashley Wilkes: I love you!" Scarlett answers, "That's something you'll never hear from me Captain Butler as long as you live." (conflict)

*Don't Be Too Quick  
to Resolve the  
Conflicts You Set in  
Motion*

- Rhett brings Scarlett a green bonnet, telling her its time she got out of her “fake” mourning. When she thanks him for his generosity, Rhett says he expects payment. She claims she won't kiss him for the bonnet (conflict), while clearly looking as if she wants to be kissed. He decides not to kiss her (conflict), even though she clearly “should be kissed., and by someone who knows how.” Yet again, the conflict is not resolved.
- Ashley, however, does kiss Scarlet. (conflict) When she begs him to declare his love, he won't. She nevertheless vows her devotion (conflict).
- Scarlet accepts a handkerchief filled with gold from the town harlot, then discovers Rhett's initials on the handkerchief, and we see her jealousy when she calls him a varmint (conflict).
- Scarlet works in the hospital tending wounded soldiers until exhausted. The war gets closer and closer to Atlanta. Scarlet, weary and confused by the crowded street, is relieved when Rhett appears and pulls her into a buggy. He tells her to leave with him, that they are two of a kind and belong together. She says she hates him and will till the day she dies (conflict).

- Later, after Scarlet delivers Melanie's baby, Rhett takes them out of the burning city. Scarlet riding beside him, expresses her disgust for all the soldiers. At the road to Tara, he jumps out of the wagon and tells her to go on. She can't believe he won't go on to Tara and help them, but he's finally going to join up with "the brave lads in gray" (conflict).
- However, he declares his love and tells her to never mind about loving him, to kiss him as a soldier going off to war. Instead, she slaps him (conflict). Rhett hands her his dueling pistol and rides off to join a lost cause.
- Scarlett fights off soldiers, starvation, and heavy taxes to save Tara. Ashley returns (conflict), and Scarlett consults him about how to acquire the \$300 she needs to resolve the tax debt. He, too, is feeling low and beaten. In a fit of weary frustration, she begs him to take her away. He refuses. She finally realizes she's lost him forever.
- Scarlet rips down the draperies and has Mammy sew them into a dress to hide her poverty, then rides to Atlanta a begs the money from Rhett (conflict). Though in jail, he is treated well and allowed to see her.
- Rhett, glad to see her at first, realizes she's there to ask him for money. "What collateral are you offering?"

he asks, and refuses her earrings and the mortgage on Tara(conflict). When she offers herself, he reminds her he's not the marrying kind (conflict). She hasn't forgotten. But he cannot give her the money, even if he wanted to, since his funds are tied up (conflict). "So you see, my dear, you've abased yourself to no purpose." She pummels his chest and storms out (conflict).

- To reestablish herself with money and power, she marries Frank Kennedy (conflict), a man she doesn't love, and insists Ashley work in her "lumber empire" (conflict).
- Later, Rhett visits Scarlet and teases that she could have had his millions if she'd just waited (conflict).
- When Scarlet foolishly drives back alone through a bad part of town (conflict), two men attack her. Frank, Ashley, and other men ride off to avenge her honor. Rhett arrives later with Ashley, feigning drunkenness when the sheriff wants to know where they've been. Rhett claims they were at the bordello. When the sheriff leaves, we learn that Ashley was wounded and Frank was killed.
- After her husband's funeral, Scarlet drinks too much and gargles with cologne to mask the odor of alcohol when Rhett arrives to speak to her. When she weeps, he accuses her of insincerity (conflict), for she never

loved Frank. Rhett proposes, saying she's been married to a boy and an old man, why not try a husband of the right age? Scarlet agrees to marry him, mostly for his money (conflict). Rhett harbors hope that she will learn to love him in time (conflict).

- After all the years of skimping and conniving since the war, Scarlet, as Rhett's wife, is finally able to luxuriate in wealth. He rebuilds Tara, and Scarlet bears him a child, Bonnie. He's delighted, but Scarlet, horrified that childbirth has robbed her of her 18" waist, bars him from her bed (conflict). He suspects she still carries a torch for Ashley and breaks down her bedroom door (conflict).
- At the lumber mill, Scarlet and Ashley embrace in friendship. Her sister witnesses the embrace and tells Rhett (conflict) and Melanie. The marriage crumbles. Rhett forces Scarlet to attend Ashley's birthday party and take the tongue-lashing she deserves from Melanie (conflict). Melanie stands up for Scarlet.
- Later, a half-drunk Rhett tells Scarlet he wishes he could squeeze Ashley from her brain (conflict). Scarlet, refusing to be frightened, tells him Ashley is better than either of them (conflict), because Ashley's an honorable gentleman.

- Rhett carries her upstairs to the bedroom (conflict). After a night of forced passion, Scarlet is pleased, happier than she's been in a long while and is ready to be reconciled in their marriage. But Rhett enters her room still bitter (conflict) and tells her he's considering divorce (conflict). He's leaving on an extended trip (conflict) with Bonnie.
- When Rhett returns from the trip, he finds Scarlet pale and pregnant. He assumes it isn't his (conflict). They argue. She falls down a long flight of stairs and miscarries.
- When Scarlet recovers, Rhett asks for forgiveness and reconciliation, asks her to sell the lumber mill, which he believes takes her away from him. Just then, Bonnie defies her father and jumps a horse. The horse falls, and she breaks her neck (conflict).
- Rhett is almost destroyed.
- Melanie, on her death bed, asks Scarlet to look after Ashley (conflict). When Scarlet sees how much Ashley loved his dead wife, she realizes she has thrown away her life on a girlish obsession. She rushes out of the house to search for Rhett.
- She finds him in the empty house, bags packed (conflict) and begs his forgiveness, saying she now realizes she loves him.

*Recognize the  
Conflict Chain  
that Forms the  
Story Spine*

But Rhett leaves (conflict) and  
Scarlet is alone (disaster).

The war comes and goes, Ashley Wilkes comes and goes, other conflicts--birthing Melanie's baby, saving Tara--come and go, but the romance between Scarlet and Rhett is the chain of conflict that forms the story spine. The conflict, mild at first, rises with each event as more and more is at stake in their relationship. And viewed from the aspect that what these two want, need, and deserve most is each other, nearly every scene between them ends in disaster.

In plotting your story, find the story spine and jot down the steps that lead from inception to completion. Make sure the action rises—that is, that each scene ends with more at stake, or with a new, unexpected twist that adds conflict, or a shortened time span for completing the quest. Never resolve one conflict until a new conflict begins or is foreshadowed. Here's an example (light romance):

- Callie, a gallery owner, agrees to show an artist (Garrett) based on his work, which is vibrant and brash. She's taking a risk; he's unknown (conflict) and out of the country (conflict). But if Callie's right, his artwork could make a name for her little known gallery. She signs him in an exclusive contract.

*Never Resolve One  
Conflict in the Chain  
Before Starting Another*

- Working through an intermediary, Callie plans a gala opening, investing money she can't afford to lose (conflict). Ads, posters, invitations. The artist is scheduled to appear. (Note: this will resolve the original conflict of him being out of the country, but the conflict of Callie's investment has been introduced.)
- The big date arrives. Callie has pulled in favors to get the media there. Lockheart's art is a hit, but the man himself fails to appear (conflict). Her biggest media contact is ticked off (conflict). Buyers still appreciate the art, but she appears somewhat unsophisticated (conflict) in her role as a knowledgeable gallery owner.
- Just as she's drowning her disappointment in a glass of the wine and about to close up, a man walks in. He's a former business partner (Shad Curry), a man who vanished, leaving her owing a small fortune in taxes (conflict).
- He asks how the sales went. She tells him to get out (conflict). He notes the red dots indicating that most of the canvases were sold, and asks how much she'd make if she kept the proceeds without paying the artist. She says that, unlike him, she's no thief (conflict). He opens his briefcase, takes out a small palette and canvas and in seconds paints a

miniature version of the Garrett art that covers the walls (conflict). He asks if the gross sales will cover what he allegedly stole when he left her.

We could go on and on with this story line, but what's important is to note that each conflict links into the next. Now let's say that Callie has a twelve-year-old son, Erin. He's a child prodigy, a brilliant musician, but also a headstrong, unmanageable kid, due to her spoiling him over the years (conflict). Callie has a tendency to let people walk over her. She's tough in business, but a pushover with people she cares about. Erin wants to go to football camp. Callie's heard about the grueling routine and is certain he'll hurt himself—provided he toughs it out (conflict). He has a history for starting activities that he never finishes—each one proving a drain on her tight budget (conflict).

***All SubPlots Must  
Have a Beginning,  
Middle and End***

How do we weave this subplot into the main conflict chain? First, keep in mind that both story lines must have a beginning, middle, and end, and these should be sketched out before you start writing. Then, list the scenes that would play out each story line.

Callie/Shad story line - *Callie/Erin story line*

*Each Subplot Needs  
Its Own Conflict  
Chain*

Scene 1) Callie and her assistant, exhausted from framing a big job, are about to grab a late lunch in the break room, including splitting a small, much-deserved bottle of wine, when the first customer of the day comes in. Rotten timing. Especially when it turns out to be a seller, not a buyer. Callie tells her assistant to go ahead and eat while she examines portfolio. Callie likes the art, but has never heard of the artist. She asks the agent where her client has shown before. Nowhere in this country. The agent has other appointments. She pushes for an answer. Callie asks how many of the artist's canvases are as good as these. Dozens, the agent promises. They'll be shipped to the first seriously interested gallery. Callie asks the agent to please have a cold drink or (sigh) a glass of wine in their break room while she and her assistant discuss the prospects.

*In the middle of this scene, Callie's son comes in. She looks at her watch and asks why he isn't practicing. He says he doesn't need to practice. He gives her a paper he wants signed, admitting him to baseball camp for six weeks. Erin pushes for Callie's attention. Callie takes the paper, tells Erin she'll think about it. Erin says he has to turn in the paper now. (He's been sitting on it.) Callie tells him to give her a minute. She clearly doesn't want to sign the paper. Erin, all scowls and*

*grumbles, guides the agent to the break room.*

***Heighten the Conflict by  
Raising the Stakes or  
Compressing the Time***

Note: In the Callie/Shad story line, the conflict rises as the stakes are raised (dozens of good canvases) and the time is shortened (other appointments). In the Callie/Erin story, the conflict rises due to Erin's deadline. The disaster in this scene is two-fold: Callie loses her wine to the agent; and Erin's request is distracting her. Remember, disasters don't always need to be huge.

Callie and her assistant, once the agent is out of sight, look at each other in agreement—the art is fabulous. The assistant is excited—their first big break. Callie is more cautious—what if they invest in a big show and it flops? The assistant says it's a chance to never have to frame another piece of corporate décor art. The decision is made. The agent promises to get back to them after she talks to her client.

*Pleased with her perceived good fortune, Callie signs Erin's application, hands it over, and tells him to go practice. He takes off, grinning.*

Still hungry, she goes to the break room to find only the crumbs of her sandwich.

Callie, at home, is on the phone with a caterer, arguing over price. With renewed vigor, she hammers the caterer's price down.

*Erin is packed and ready to leave for camp. She wants him to take his music and practice “mentally.” He says that “Zen” stuff is nonsense. She shoves it into his back pack, kisses him goodbye, and watches him climb into a car with another kid and his father. The father is cheerfully knuckling his son’s head. Seeing their easy camaraderie, and her son climbing into the back seat alone, Callie wonders if she’s cheated him all these years, never marrying. (This foreshadows conflict to come.) When she hangs up the phone, she sees her son’s music sheets shoved behind a vase.*

The night of the gala arrives. Lots of excitement, and lots of anxiety as Callie makes excuses for the celebrated guest.

*Note: This is where a third story line might be woven in, if needed.*

When Shad arrives, the scene is just between the two of them, and their attraction to each other is evident. But that affair ended long ago, in heartbreak for Callie. She wants him out of her life, along with his paintings. She wants no dealings with a crook. And in this pivotal scene, we realize, of course, that Erin is Shad’s son, whom he never knew existed.

***The Subplot Weaves  
In and Out of the  
Primary Conflict  
Chain***

Familiar plot lines, true, but do you see how the subplot weaves in and out of the primary conflict chain? And

how conflict never ends until a new one is at has begun or is at least foreshadowed?

As an exercise, identify the conflict links in this story. Then look at your own work and highlight the conflict that appears in each chain.