

**WRITERS' EASY GUIDE**

# **Dramatizing Conflict**

**Invoke Tension on  
Every Page**

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# Dramatizing Conflict

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## **Invoke Tension on Every Page**

Repetitious conflict presentation, like a relentless Klaxon, can be monotonous and almost as deadly to effective storytelling as no conflict at all. Yet with all the tools available to you, conflict does not have to be repetitious.

- Verbal conflict, for example, can come off as a name-calling battle, and there may be times in your story where this works. But verbal conflict can also be subtle and still have impact.
- Physical conflict might appear in your story as (wo)man against (wo)man, hero(ine) against natural forces, or hero(ine) against machine. Physical action is dramatic, and usually holds a reader's attention. But it can lose a reader just as easily when the physical interaction becomes static.
- Emotional conflict can be just as compelling to the reader as physical or verbal conflict. Stories of psychological suspense involve a great deal of internalization, and when handled with skill, such stories can go for pages in the mind of a

central character and still entrance a reader.

Detective fiction, particularly, has a number of Q&A scenes in which the detective is trying to get information. Such scenes can quickly become repetitious and less than exciting. Romance stories need many scenes filled with romantic tension, a form of internal conflict that must be externalized. But by including conflict on every page, and varying the types of conflict, a writer can create page-turning suspense while planting clues, keeping the lovers apart for another hundred pages, and delivering necessary exposition.

*Varying Your  
Conflict  
Presentation Keeps  
Q&A Scenes  
Interesting*

### **Verbal Conflict**

Verbal conflict generally involves characters who feel strongly about a person, situation or idea and must deal with a difference of opinion intellectually, through dialogue. Your verbal conflict will be more interesting if you vary the presentation from scene to scene.

- Two or more characters openly expressing opposing views.  
*“Stan, this is a chance, man. A chance to score big.”*  
*“Score? You want to gamble with what took six years to build?”*
- Two or more characters expressing similar views, but their nonverbal

***In Verbal Conflict,  
Sometimes Only  
One Character is  
Talking***

language and/or inner dialogue doesn't match.

"Stan, this is a chance, man. A chance to score big."

"It's about time something came our way." Stanley stared out a grimy window over the sink. He wasn't ready to gamble away six years of hard work.

- One character expressing while others show nonverbal disagreement.

"Stan, this is a chance, man. A chance to score big."

Stanley turned away, braced himself against the kitchen counter as he stared out a grimy window over the sink. Two or more characters agreeing openly on one matter while in emotional disagreement on a different matter

- Two or more characters trying to converse or reach agreement while distracted by auditory, physical or emotional distractions.

*"Stan, this is a chance, man. A chance to score big."*

*"Score?" Stanley pulled his chair closer, but the noise from the street repairs outside hammered his ears. "You're saying we should gamble away six years?"*

Practice all three methods. As your skills improve, mix them up, experiment. Keep the dialogue crisp, the actions specific.

In dialogue, every word needs to carry its weight in revealing character, moving the story forward, or showing conflict.

### **Physical Conflict**

Physical conflict occurs when characters cannot thrash out their differences verbally.

*Physical Conflict  
Might Include  
Dialogue or  
Internal  
Monologue, But It  
Can Also Stand On  
Its Own*

- Two or more characters engaged in physical combat
- One person menacing another who won't retaliate
- One or more persons engaged in a physical activity while under duress (e.g., digging his own grave)
- A character engaged in a physical activity while another creates distraction or interruption

### **Emotional Conflict**

Emotional conflict occurs within a character's mind. Both verbal and physical encounters involve an emotional element—otherwise, the characters will not be passionate enough about their views to intrigue the reader. But internal emotional conflict, which takes place entirely in a character's mind, is a strong storytelling device even without physical or verbal externalization.

Unfortunately, I see many unpublished manuscripts that rely to heavily on emotional conflict handled in such a way that it's repetitious and, quite frankly, boring. To avoid this trap, vary

***When You Stay in  
a Character's  
Head for Long  
Periods, Make  
Sure It's an  
Interesting Place  
to Be***

the presentation. Here are just a few possibilities.

- The character has two options, each equally attractive or devastating
- The character has reached a point of no return and must find the fortitude to move on
- The character is faced with a horrible or wonderful surprise that turns his whole world around
- The character has encountered lies from her past that, if true, will negate everything she believes

**Situational or Relational?**

The situation you toss your character into initiates conflict.

- A flat tire at 80 miles an hour on the freeway
- A bomb that must be detonated to save lives
- A new job with unrelenting demands
- A new puppy who hasn't been house trained

These plot-generated conflicts are engrossing, and you'll use many of them in your story. But the ones that readers find most compelling are relational conflicts. Without fail, readers who like the Dixie Flannigan novels want to know "What's going to happen between these characters?"

Create relational conflict, present it in a variety of verbal, physical and/or

emotional scenes that move the story forward while revealing character and foreshadowing events to come—and you’ll have a page-turner. Here’s how the conflicts above can be made relational:

***Emotional Scenes  
that Move the Story  
Forward While  
Revealing Character  
and Foreshadowing  
Events to Come  
Create a Page-  
Turner***

- A flat tire at 80 miles an hour on the freeway—two women returning for an important meeting. The assistant wanted to stop and get the car checked out. Her superior said there wasn’t enough time. They pull over. One woman tries to flag down a male driver to change the tire. The other opens the trunk and starts unbolting the spare. With cars zipping past, they discuss the meeting they will obviously miss. As the scene unfolds in physical (tire changing), verbal (discussion), and emotional conflict, the subtext created by their actions and words can dramatically reveal frustrations that might otherwise be boringly summarized.
- A live bomb that must be found in a parking garage—the specialists are trained and ready, but they’ve never had a real bomb scare in their small town. Earlier, they argued over a woman, one man is dating her, the other still loves her. They find a briefcase wedged where a briefcase shouldn’t be. They both know the rules, but no matter how careful they

***Put Your Story  
People in Tough  
Situations—and  
Don't Make It Easy  
to Get Out***

are, this could be the last moments of their lives. As they look at the suspected bomb, they know it only requires one person to disarm it. How do they decide?

- A new job with unrelenting demands—the supervisor is a workaholic and expects everyone else to put in extra hours, but this was not evident in the interview. She has an invalid brother who needs her attention at night. She can't afford to lose her job, but she has to tell her boss she can't stay late every night. She knocks softly at his door, opens it and sees him viewing a forbidden file. He jumps and turns around. They can't escape this situation without addressing some important issues.
- A new puppy who hasn't been house trained—the dog was a gift, and not a very welcome one. Her daughter felt she needed the company, living out in the country alone. What she doesn't need are urine stains and dog hair to clean up every day. She picks up the phone and tells her daughter the dog has to go, not tomorrow but right now, and they argue bitterly over the fact that she always returns the daughter's gifts. Watching the emotional exchange, the puppy crawls in her lap and gives her a good tongue-lapping.

***Give Every  
Character in Your  
Scene Strong  
Passions and Put  
Them on Opposite  
Sides of an Issue***

Do you see how rich a scene becomes when you rely on conflict? And how much more depth a conflict can have when the situational conflict becomes relational? Give every character in your scene strong passions, put them on opposite sides of an issue, and you'll create compelling story. Present the story in a variety of dramatic encounters that include verbal and physical exchanges, as well as internalized emotion, and you'll keep the reader intrigued to the end.

In a scene from *Bitch Factor*, Dixie is bringing fugitive Parker Dann from North Dakota to Texas. As is her habit, she continually refuses to engage in conversation with a fugitive while on the road. Frustrated with the unfamiliar hazards of driving in a blizzard, Dixie quietly blows cool when her Mustang ends up in a snow bank.

*Dixie opened the car door, had to shove it hard to clear the drift. The wind's fury pushed her back, but her own fury won out. She slammed the door, sank knee-deep in snow, felt it trickle over the tops of her boots.*

*Sucking in a breath of frigid air, she kicked her way through the snow to the edge of the highway, almost relishing the dull ache in her lungs. Any feeling, even the worst pain, was better than the helpless reeling as the Mustang spun across the ice....*

After this physical conflict, we continue in Dixie's head (internal emotional conflict) for several paragraphs before she steps back into the car.

***Internal  
Emotional  
Conflict Shows in  
a Character's  
Actions—  
Including Non-  
Action***

*Dixie's teeth, chattering like castanets, began to ache. The biting cold stung her face. She tugged open the car door and sank onto the seat.*

*"Two things," Dann said.*

*"Here's what's happening under the seat right now..." He paused a beat. When she didn't respond, he continued. "Residual exhaust heat is melting the snow. As fast as it melts, the wind freezes it again while the car's weight compresses it. Soon we'll be stuck in ice. I'll give you one guess which is easier to get out of."*

*Maybe trying to get out wasn't the best idea. She'd played a game once called "Lost in the Arctic." Survival hinged on whether to stay put and wait for rescue or to start walking. Players who elected to walk died.*

*Watertown was a hundred miles ahead of them, hours ahead, considering driving conditions that worsened by the minut. Even if she succeeded in getting the Mustang back on the road, what made her think she could keep it there?*

*Parker Dann had grown up with this sort of weather in Montana. He*

*would know a hell of a lot more than she did about surviving it.*

*“You said two things,” she reminded him.*

In this verbal conflict, Parker does most of the talking. There’s no verbal disagreement from Dixie, but in her mind she’s weighing the merit of taking Dann’s advice, a man who has fled the justice system and to whom she normally wouldn’t lend an ear. By *not* answering directly when he tells about the dangers of sitting still, she’s showing Dann that she’s listening but doesn’t necessarily agree. Because we’re in Dixie’s point of view, we know her internal conflict.

***When Conflict Occurs Internally, and the Character is Alone, Try Contrasting the Turbulent Internal Landscape with Ordinary Activity***

Dramatizing internal conflict means bringing it out on the page in action and/or dialogue, but the underlying emotion must always be present. When the conflict occurs internally, rely on a *contrasting* verbal exchange or action to dramatize the internal situation.

- **Action:** Later in *Bitch Factor*, Parker Dann is alone in a cabin, handcuffed to a bed. He passes the time playing Solitaire.

*Stupid mistake, Parker figured, tipping his hand like that. Should’ve kept his friggin mouth shut till Sparks knocked on the door. Then go into his act. Writhe around, eyes rolled back, legs jerking, head*

*flopping like a chicken with a wrung neck, making a gurgling, choking noise in his throat. All the time rattling that handcuff. Sparks would've been suspicious of Flannigan right off. So would the sheriff, keeping a sick man chained up like that.*

*Parker flipped up a black nine to play on a red ten.*

*The cabin, with its morning muffler of snow, was as quiet as a cell in the dead of night. Parker shuddered. Worst combination he could think of, silence and isolation.*

***Two People  
Talking About the  
Weather is  
Boring. Two  
People Talking  
About the Weather  
While Building  
a Time Bomb Can  
Be Riveting***

- Dialogue: In *Bitch Factor*, Dixie breaks into a suspect's house to plant listening devices. A neighbor, obviously aware that someone's inside, knocks impatiently on the door. Dixie improvises, pretending to be a plumber..

*The woman outside stood about five feet tall, shorter even than Dixie, and wore an animal-print jumpsuit. She was plump, pretty, thirtyish, and curious as hell.*

*"Who're you? Where's Hermie?"*

*"Plumber, ma'am. Nobody's here but me."*

*"Well. How'd you get in if ain't nobody here?"*

*"Landlord sent me over to fix a leak. One leaky faucet can make a whopping difference in a water bill."*

*Dixie drawled each word like  
pouring molasses.*

We don't have to hear Dixie's  
internal monologue to know she's  
scrambling to avoid being caught.

**Action, dialogue and internalization—  
when you use all the tools in your  
storytelling kit, conflict will never be  
repetitious.**

*“The business of a novelist is not to  
chronicle great events but to make small  
ones interesting.” – Arthur  
Schopenhauer*