

OBSTACLES & RESPONSES



Once you have chosen overall story and scene goals (verb + object), you must provide obstacles to their goals. Obstacles are provided by the character himself, other characters, and the story world. Obstacles require the character to do something in response.

To overcome an obstacle, a character must think or act. His response can be mild or exaggerated depending on the circumstances. One character's attempts to overcome an obstacle result in success. Another character's attempts result in failure. Your reader navigates the curves created by successes and failures until they reach a satisfying end.

TYPES OF OBSTACLES

☯ **INTERNAL OBSTACLES** originate in the character's own mind. They are difficult to overcome because most characters lack objectivity and insight into their subconscious motivations. Rarely are characters self-aware enough to know their strengths, weaknesses, and triggers. Friends and foes hold up mirrors so the character can see himself better. Friends and foes reinforce these obstacles or help overcome them. All characters have emotional triggers and cause explosions by pulling other people's emotional triggers. Internal obstacles prevent a character from achieving his overall story or scene goal due to:

- Internal resistance is based on temperament to things that go against his natural inclinations.
- Fears and phobias keep him from going where he needs to go or taking the action he needs to take.
- Desire for a personal currency tempts him to do the wrong thing or sidelines his efforts.
- Low self-esteem, arrogance, or pride keeps him from doing what needs to be done or makes him do things better left untried.
- Psychological factors, such as conditioning, belief systems, mental illness, anxiety, depression, and addiction keep a character from seeing the situation clearly or keep him from making healthy decisions about what needs to be done or said.

✂ **ABILITY OBSTACLES** are generated by how he makes decisions and takes action. Once a character knows something, and has pondered it or talked it over, he has to do something about it. Ability obstacles are created by a character's need to decide what to do, form a plan, and take the necessary action.

- A character lacks the strength or expertise to perform a physical or mental task.
- He struggles with forming a plan and seeing it through.
- He does not have enough or has too much time to think it through.
- Characters differ in their approach to the problem.
- His natural approach fails and he must rely on his weak side.
- He tries the opposite approach and it backfires.
- He invests effort in the wrong solution and fails.
- He is uncomfortable deciding or unhappy with the plan.
- He decides too soon or too late.
- He resists taking action or takes the wrong action to get it over with.

 **EXTERNAL OBSTACLES** come in the form of physical restrictions and time. Physical obstacles prevent movement, communication, access to a person, the retrieval of an object, or necessary exchanges. Physical distance prevents access. Time limits increase tension. Physical obstacles come in the form of:

- A physical barrier, like having to break into a safe or out of a cell.
- A situational barrier, such as trying to enter an area that is off limits.
- Physical restraints, like being stuck inside a car, a plane, or a train.
- Missing the boat, train, or airplane.
- Limited mobility due to a temporary or permanent physical disability.
- Misunderstanding the timeframe involved or not having enough time.
- Actual physical distances make accomplishing the task difficult or impossible.

- Being misled about the correct time.
- Being given an impossible deadline.
- Physical impediments to navigating between point A and point B.

 **KNOWLEDGE OBSTACLES** stem from what he knows, when he knows it, and the type of information he embraces or rejects. At each stage of the story problem, you have to decide what your character knows, when he knows it, how certain he is, and how hard it would be to convince him he is wrong. Knowledge obstacles prevent understanding and communication in the form of:

- Missing information.
- Conflicting ways of obtaining information.
- Receiving the same information, but interpreting it differently.
- Conflicting information.
- Inaccurate information.
- Inability to understand the information due to language differences.
- Inability to deliver an important piece of information.
- Knowing something he doesn't want to acknowledge.
- Communicating what he knows.
- Who he chooses to tell.
- How he chooses to tell them.

 **ORGANIZATIONAL OBSTACLES** are provided by the society he lives in, the bureaucracies he fights against, and whose authority he relies on. Organizational obstacles relate to bureaucracies, companies, or groups that offer resistance in the form of:

- Conflicting goals.
- Inefficient practices.
- Needing consensus or permission from a superior to move forward. The character must find ways around the authority or convince him to change his mind.
- Lack of funds, policies, or procedures to implement the plan.
- An action or decision counters a religious or political agenda.
- Prejudices against people, places, things, and behaviors prevent solving the story problem or achieving the scene goal.
- Moral restrictions enforced by society based on the time and place in which he lives must be subverted or changed to overcome the obstacle.
- Taboos are social restrictions that forbid the action or decision and result in fatal or highly unpleasant consequences.
- Police enforce the legal rules of the society your character lives in.
- Rulers are charismatic, whimsical, and downright dangerous to cross. They set the tone and hand down the mandates for the world they control.

 **DISUNITY OBSTACLES** arise from conflicting beliefs, values, and who he listens to or believes in. Disunity obstacles goal in the form of:

- Competition.
- Jealousy and resentment.
- Gossip, rumors, and backbiting.
- Blackmail.
- Differing goals and needs.

- Dislike, hatred, or anger.
- Love for something or someone.
- Friendship and loyalty.
- Oppositional methods of negotiating the world.
- Shallowness versus depth of connections.

TYPES OF RESPONSES

⚡ **SPEED BUMPS** require your character to power over them or slow down. Use speed bumps when he is on the right path. He overcomes the scene obstacle and continues on despite the interruption. A speed bump can be:

Mental: Mental resistance is provided by a habit, like a compulsive tendency to ruminate over a fact that doesn't add up. Other characters discount his concern. He continues to run it over in his mind until he grasps why the facts didn't add up. He powers over it and overcomes the obstacle.

Emotional: Emotional resistance is provided by a thought process, such as the belief a certain suspect is guilty or a friend is innocent. Other people try to convince the character he is wrong. He remains steadfast in his belief and is proven correct and powers over their objections.

Physical: Physical resistance is provided by a wall that needs to be scaled or a safe broken into. He runs into snags that must be addressed before proceeding. When he finally scales the wall or opens the safe, he gets what he needs.

Tactical: When aliens land, he prefers to talk first and shoot them down later. Solving the story problem requires him to disregard the characters urging him to launch the rockets.

As long as the character refuses to quit or change his mind, he eventually wins. Speed bumps demand patience, consistency, and steadfastness. This is difficult for characters lacking those qualities. A character may need to develop those qualities to solve the story problem or solve conflict at scene level.

 **DEAD ENDS** force a character to back up and change the direction of his thoughts or the focus of his efforts. They waste time when the clock is ticking. Use dead ends when he is headed down the wrong path to force him to take the correct path. A dead end can be:

Mental: When confronted with a problem, he relies on his native inclinations to decide or take action. When his instinctive approach doesn't work, he must formulate a new plan or take a different action.

Emotional: The obstacle requires him to do something he refuses to consider, like breaking the law. He must backtrack and figure out a way to solve the problem in a way that doesn't break the law.

Physical: He encounters a physical obstacle he can't remove. He can enter a room without an alternative exit. He must go out the way he came in and face the threat or risk exposure. In his race to point B, the bridge is out and he takes a boat.

Tactical: If he tried aggression, he needs to be subversive. If he is too nice, he must be mean. If subtle doesn't work, a direct approach is needed. If brute force doesn't work, he needs a subtler approach.

 **DETOURS** force him to increase his knowledge, improve his skills, add to his experience, or find new resources to make up for what he lacks along the way.

Mental: Detours condition him to overcome internal resistance to something or someone he has an aversion to.

Emotional: Detours require him to change a belief, prejudice, or opinion.

Physical: He is physically required to go around the object or person. Where he was headed might not be the way through.

Tactical: Detours force him to re-evaluate plans. This is harder for some characters more than others.

Detours give the character a chance to learn something new about the situation, himself, or someone else.

Y FORKS force him to reconsider his options. Which direction, information, method, or person is the best option?

Mental: A fork makes him question what the truth is. What should he believe? Who does he trust?

Emotional: A fork causes indecision. It's easier when there is only one action to take or one lead to follow. The more options there are, the more complicated the decision becomes. Which choice causes the least damage? Which choice meets the most resistance?

Physical: A fork compels a character to pick a tunnel, a hallway, or a road. Exit through the window or the door? Hide or run?

Tactical: A fork limits him to two options. Certain characters hate having their options limited and attempt too many things at once. Their energy is diverted into multiple tactics and leads to failure. Some characters freeze when presented with options either because they hate being limited or fear making the wrong choice.

※ **TRAFFIC JAMS** force a character to slow down and cool off, to think more rationally, or exercise more caution.

Mental: Waiting for a traffic jam to clear gives him time to think or discuss something important with someone while he is stalled.

Emotional: Inserting a traffic jam when your character is highly emotional rarely ends in success whether he is dealing with a toddler or a mob boss. It deepens the scene conflict or sets up a complication for a future scene. If the character hurts or angers someone, paybacks are inevitable.

Physical: Traffic jams are created by people, places, or things. They force the character to find a way around the obstacle physically. It could be an actual traffic jam, a crowd he must push through, or a herd of cows in the road.

Tactical: Traffic jams gum up the works and delay a character's efforts to achieve the scene goal. He must consider alternative plans until the jam clears.

⌘ **CLOVER LEAFS** force a character to step back and analyze things. Some characters are better at analysis than others. They muddy the situation. There is only one way to escape or skirt the problem, but there is no clear-cut path through.

Mental: Clover leaves force the character to examine interconnected facts to unravel a puzzle, a rambling narrative, or confusing evidence. He must sort out which thread is the right thread before taking action.

☐ **Emotional:** Clover leaves make the character confused about where to turn. There are multiple layers and options and none of them are win-win. This is difficult for characters who don't want to intentionally hurt anyone else. Moral dilemmas are a form of clover leaf.

☐ **Physical:** Clover leaves make the character lose precious time. He physically goes around and around and doesn't know which way to head.

☐ **Tactical:** Clover leaves require the character to sift through multiple strategies and pick one. It might not be the right one, but he tries it anyway. He may have to go back and try a different strategy in another scene.

 **TRAFFIC LIGHTS** force a character to pause until the situation changes. This obstacle shoots anxiety to its highest level when the clock is ticking. Some characters use the added time to reinforce their decision or plan, others fall apart. He can use the time constructively or destructively.

☐ **Mental:** His mind refuses to go there. He mentally shuts down. He cannot cross a specific line or cannot do something until he feels he has permission.

☐ **Emotional:** He must wait for the right moment to deliver the bad news, reveal a secret, or drop a clue. He may have to wait until he has the other person alone. Anxiety causes some characters to scatter, some to withdraw, and others to explode.

☐ **Physical:** The plane may not land for hours. The boss may not be available until five. He may not see his wife again for a week.

☐ **Tactical:** He realizes what he is about to do results in consequences he had not considered before. He must pull back until he figures out a different way.

 **STOP SIGNS** force a character to question whether he is doing the right thing and if he is strong enough to handle the consequences.

☐ **Mental:** Stop signs make your character reconsider the right action or decision to achieve the goal. Self-doubt makes him more human and accessible to the reader. Something or someone comes along and shouts, “Wait! Are you sure?”

☐ **Emotional:** A stop sign makes him question whether he is doing the right thing with his life, his relationship, his job, or his place in the world. Someone or something halts him in his tracks and makes him consider the emotional cost. He may stick with what is comfortable or take chances.

☐ **Physical:** A stop sign can be presented by a person, place, or thing. He has decided on a course of action, but someone or something comes along and physically prevents him from taking action.

☐ **Tactical:** A character encounters a figurative stop sign that makes him hesitate for a moment before continuing his plan. Will it trigger a bomb or an alarm? Will it be a point of no return? Can he ever go back again if he powers through on his current course? Is it a one-way exit?

 **COLLISIONS** turn the character’s world or understanding upside down. Collisions make effective inciting events, turning points, and climactic moments. A collision annihilates what he has believed or done up to that point.

☐ **Mental:** A character can be confronted by something overturning everything he ever thought or believed: aliens descend, a conspiracy is revealed, or a man turns out to be a woman.

☐ **Emotional:** A character can be confronted by an awareness of something he never imagined: infidelity, abuse, or betrayal by someone he trusted.

☐ **Physical:** Collisions can be actual crashes, accidents, life changing illnesses, or physical realities that harm the character or someone he loves. They act as wake up calls.

☐ **Tactical:** Collisions destroy whatever his plan of action was. He must sort through the rubble and put the pieces together to form a new strategy.