

LEVEL ONE: EXTERNAL CONFLICT

We began with the premise for a story involving a meteor streaking toward earth, a conflicted scientist, his crumbling marriage, and a coworker who makes his life miserable.

We decided to make the story about Dick, love interest Sally, bossy Jane, jealous Ted, and the meteor streaking toward earth.

We have selected the Disaster Thriller format. Let's start crafting conflict.

External conflicts test the protagonist's courage, nerves, and determination.

They are high tension scenes that focus on the question of whether the overall story goal will be achieved. They are the main actions and reactions that provide the turning points and lead directly to and include the climax of the story.

External scenes show the characters caught up in the situation of your premise such as: boy meets girl, the volcano erupts, aliens invade the town, a body has been found, they are all forced to go to a wedding or reunion, or the wagon train heads out for the wild west. They do not address the subplots unless and until the subplot collides with the main plot at the climax.

They introduce the protagonist, the inciting event, the story goal, the prize for reaching the goal, and the cost for not reaching the story goal (stakes). They show him developing and attempting a plan of action for tackling the story problem. In the usual three-act structure, his first plan fails and he must come up with a second plan (the wrong solution). That plan fails and he must come up with the third plan (the right solution).

There have to be some positive moments where it looks like the protagonist is gaining ground. You could divide them equally: five scenes where he is making headway and five scenes where he is losing ground.

Once you've picked a skeleton and dressed it up, it is time to list your initial thoughts on events that will happen to trigger then escalate this external conflict: snags in the plan, unexpected discoveries, reversals, gains, and increasing levels of threat. Arrange them in an order that shows cause and effect and final resolution. The first scene should contain the inciting event. The final scene should contain the climax.

Continuing with our premise, we have come up with a list of scenes that introduce and eventually resolve the outer conflict: the imminent meteor strike.

External Conflict 1: Dick learns a meteor will strike.

External Conflict 2: He thinks of a way to stop it while it is still far away. He will nudge it with a satellite.

External Conflict 3: The satellite crashes into, but doesn't change, the meteor's trajectory.

External Conflict 4: He comes up with plan to divert the meteor with a laser beam.

External Conflict 5: They can't get the beam close enough from the ground.

External Conflict 6: They send the laser to the space station. The equipment breaks off and is lost in space.

External Conflict 7: They are back to the drawing board - all seems lost. They enter countdown mode.

External Conflict 8: Dick comes up with a final plan. It is do or die. They will nuke the meteor.

External Conflict 9: They rev up the shuttle loaded with a lethal payload to intercept the meteor and, despite last minute glitches, the shuttle takes off on a suicide mission.

External Conflict 10: Their plan succeeds and everyone lives, except the crew of the shuttle.

LEVEL TWO: ANTAGONIST CONFLICT

Antagonist Conflict scenes introduce us to the antagonist or antagonistic forces. This is your verbal camera focused on stage right.

These scenes test the protagonist's and antagonist's knowledge, ingenuity, and strength. They are battles of will and wit.

They develop how the protagonist and antagonist face off. These scenes zero in on the conflict between the two opposing characters. Other characters may be present, but the focus is on the direct confrontation between the antagonist and protagonist or the antagonist himself.

If you are following only the protagonist's POV, these scenes are where the lead alien and the hero face off, the serial killer taunts the investigator, the brothers fight over the woman, the scientists clash over the best way to thwart the meteor, or the knight and the infidel cross swords.

If the verbal camera follows the antagonist, or these scenes are written from his point of view, they show him actively pursuing his goal and reveal his personal dilemma. They show him interacting with his henchmen or threatening secondary characters.

In Antagonist scenes, he argues his side of the thematic argument. All of these conflicts lead to the climactic confrontation with the protagonist. The final scene reveals the fate of the antagonist. This is true whether you are using a negative or positive antagonist.

If you are using antagonistic forces rather than a person, these scenes show the protagonist struggling against them. If the force is nature, these scenes show the protagonist being threatened by nature. If the force is society or a controlling power, these scenes show him working against them. If the force is family disapproval, and a specific member isn't singled out as an antagonist, then these scenes show the protagonist trying to win them over or to break their hold over him.

Using our meteor strike premise, we choose Ted as the antagonist and list ten ideas for events that will happen to escalate the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist or antagonistic forces: snags in the plan, unexpected discoveries, reversals, gains, important information concealed or

revealed, and increasing levels of threat and arrange them in an order that will make the most impact. The first scene should introduce the antagonist or forces. The final scene should reveal the final disposition of the antagonist or vanquishing of the forces.

In this story, Ted is directly opposed to stopping the meteor. He has been so damaged by life that he thinks it is time for humanity to be destroyed. Since this is a Thriller, we will allow the verbal camera to follow Ted.

Antagonist Conflict 1: Ted learns there is a meteor headed toward earth. Finally, the world can be destroyed and he doesn't have to lift a finger. All he has to do is sit back and watch the show.

Antagonist Conflict 2: Dick has come up with a plan. Ted vows to make sure it doesn't work.

Antagonist Conflict 3: Ted is denied access to the equipment. He has something on one of the grounds crew, Bob, and uses that pressure to convince him to tamper with it. But we'll all die. Do you want to die now or later?

Antagonist Conflict 4: Ted confronts Dick. Why are you trying to stop the inevitable?

Antagonist Conflict 5: Dick has come up with a new plan. So Ted must tamper with the laser beam.

Antagonist Conflict 6: Ted calls Sally and tells her Dick and Jane are having an affair.

Antagonist Conflict 7: Dick confronts Ted. You had something to do with this. You'll never prove it and in a few days it won't matter anyway.

Antagonist Conflict 8: Ted must find a way to make certain the shuttle doesn't take off.

Antagonist Conflict 9: Ted's attempts to prevent take off fail.

Antagonist Conflict 10: Ted is led off in handcuffs.

LEVEL THREE: INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Interpersonal Conflict scenes reveal how the protagonist and love interest, if applicable, are affected by friends and foes. These conflicts test the protagonist's friendships, loyalties, and will to continue.

This is your verbal camera focused on stage left. Interpersonal conflicts are the push and pull away from the action needed to solve the story problem by secondary characters.

Depending on the point of view, they can involve the friends and foes interacting with the protagonist, love interest, antagonist, or each other. Friends and foes can be used in any combination of scenes that fit with your story line. There will be both positive and negative interchanges with these characters.

Interpersonal scenes address subplots and side stories which should culminate before the climax, with everyone lined up and revealed to be on which side of the fight. Subplots should circle back to and intersect the external story problem. If they don't, you should consider cutting them.

Secondary characters should have an agenda and stakes. They want to hide, reveal, provide, or take something away. Their personal goals may be at odds with the protagonist's goal, or the antagonist's goal. Their situation may complicate the overall story problem, intentionally or unintentionally.

If you are writing in third person or shifting point of view, you can use the different viewpoints to express the friends and foes thoughts and feelings or show them taking actions the protagonist would be unaware of.

Interpersonal scenes require the most flexibility depending on the point of view you choose, the number of subplots, and the length of the story. It is easy to divide scenes among them.

Let's say that Jane is in love with Ted and wants to help him. Captain Curtis is in charge of the space shuttle. General Smith represents the military and controls the satellite. Bob is the ground crewman controlled by Ted. Jane works with Ted and Dick.

Interpersonal Conflict 1: Jane meets with Ted to declare her feelings before it is too late. He manipulates her into helping him without telling her the real reason.

Interpersonal Conflict 2: Jane meets with Dick and gives him erroneous data.

Interpersonal Conflict 3: General Smith argues that his satellite is too important to be used to adjust the meteor's trajectory. It could cause more harm than good. They should blow it up.

Interpersonal Conflict 4: Bob tries to tinker with the satellite, but almost gets caught by Jane.

Interpersonal Conflict 5: General Smith relents and allows the satellite to be used.

Interpersonal Conflict 6: Captain Curtis balks at sending the laser to the space station.

Interpersonal Conflict 7: Captain Curtis appeals to his crew. Is anyone willing to go? Captain Curtis decides to go himself.

Interpersonal Conflict 8: Ted and Jane have a show down. Jane can't believe Ted is so evil.

Interpersonal Conflict 9: Bob rats on Ted.

Interpersonal Conflict 10: Jane and Bob celebrate when the shuttle succeeds.

Interpersonal Conflict 11: General Smith tells Dick to stay. He is too valuable an asset to retire.

LAYER FOUR: INTERNAL CONFLICT

Internal Conflict scenes introduce and explore the personal dilemma your protagonist struggles with. The verbal camera is focused with a tight spotlight beaming on the protagonist in the background. Use these scenes to reveal the protagonist's back-story and show him dealing with his guilt, pain, or need which leads up to and is resolved by his point of change.

These conflicts test the protagonist's character and faith. They make him question who he is and what he does. These are the emotional complications or ties that bind that complicate the overall story problem.

If the love interest has equal weight, you can explore her personal dilemma and point of change in these scenes as well.

Internal conflict scenes can be flashbacks, dreams, and revelations of back-story through memories or an encounter with a friend or foe.

You can show him exhibiting one type of behavior in the beginning and a complete reversal of behavior at the end to show the point of change.

These scenes reveal the event that happened in the past and how it changed him: he deals with the death of his partner, the loss of his wife, the child he didn't save.

The internal conflict often culminates in the section after the climax, where we find out if the protagonist lives happily ever after. It can also culminate just prior to the climax.

That does not mean other characters cannot be in these scenes or that he is not doing anything. It means the verbal camera is zeroed in on his thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions to the underlying problem that drives him and complicates the overall story problem.

In this thriller, Dick's personal dilemma focuses on his marriage. His marriage is on the rocks because he is a workaholic. He had planned to retire but this latest crisis forces him to keep working.

Internal Conflict 1: Dick and Sally make plans to go on a long-awaited vacation. He gets a call.

Internal Conflict 2: Dick informs Sally that he isn't retiring after all. He can't tell her why.

Internal Conflict 3: Dick and Sally fight about the vacation. Looks like we'll have to cancel it.

Internal Conflict 4: Sally gives Dick an ultimatum. I'm tired of waiting. It's me or the job. Dick replies if I don't do this there won't be any me or you. What do you mean? I can't tell you.

Internal Conflict 5: Sally accuses Dick of having an affair with Jane at work. Dick is called away.

Internal Conflict 6: Dick finds Sally packing her bags. Don't leave. I love you. I've always loved you. Then why? Should he tell? Is it better for her to know or not know that their days might be numbered?

Internal Conflict 7: Sally tells Dick that she received a call from Ted and that he said there was no reason for Dick to stay at work. That he is lying to her.

Internal Conflict 8: Dick tells Sally the truth.

Internal Conflict 9: Dick and Sally spend the evening together knowing it may be their last.

Internal Conflict 10: Dick and Sally leave for the airport to go on their vacation.

In the next section, we will look at the best way to layer our conflict ideas.

For more information on this process for all story skeletons, pick up a copy of *Story Building Blocks: The Four Layers of Conflict*.