Six Steps for Creating Conflict

Published in *The Writer Magazine,* May 2011

Writers are always looking for trouble. But the trouble with trouble, from the storyteller's point of view, is figuring out how to settle the conflicts we generate. How do we get out of the mess we imagine? If we tame down the trouble too far, we're boring. But if the trouble gets out of hand, we can find ourselves in a hopeless muddle. In our writing, as in our lives, solving problems is no easy matter.

But writers are not the only people who go looking for trouble. Professional mediators also spend their lives trying to extricate people from complicated predicaments. So do psychologists. It's only somewhat perverse, I've decided, for storytellers to filch the insights of these experts. What they say about how to *solve* problems we can turn inside out to *create* problems—problems that then we know how to manage. Problem-solving is difficult, these folks say, because human motivation is fiercely complex.

The way to make real trouble, then, is to map the motives of our characters very carefully. And the way to resolve the conflict we have created is to use that human complexity in rich and subtle ways. As the experts explain, let's begin with motive. It can be imagined as having six layers.

1. Who Wants What? The first and most visible layer of motive is the position a character takes when an issue comes up. For instance, imagine that Marge takes the position "I want to go out to dinner." And let's say her husband, Bill, does not want to go out to dinner. That's his position. This is where many conflicts start. There's a problem—it's dinner time and they are hungry—but these characters have sharply different ideas about how that problem should be solved.

Conflicts can also start when one character does something that contradicts another character's position on an issue. George forgets a wedding anniversary. Mildred hires a new sales clerk on the spur of the moment, without giving her co-owner a chance to weigh in. A cop brings a suspect in for questioning without letting his captain know ahead of time. Such mistakes can be innocent, or they can be conniving. They can be

deliberate, or they can be unconscious. And the person who feels trespassed against can respond with anything from outrage to small silent annoyance. One can begin to develop rich complexity of both character and plot by mapping out ahead of time the positions that characters will take on the various problems that give the plot its shape.

2. What's at Stake? People always have reasons for what they do or for the positions they take, although these reasons may not be entirely clear to anyone—including the person involved. Marge takes the position, "I want to go out to dinner," because she has a need she is trying to meet; there's something here she wants to achieve. Negotiators label that her "interest." She has an "interest" in the position she is taking.

Maybe she is taking that position because she is too tired to cook. Or maybe she is bored to death with her own cooking. But maybe she has something important to discuss with her husband during a long quiet dinner in a nice restaurant. When she takes the position, "Let's go out to dinner," her husband doesn't know why she is taking that position. Maybe she doesn't exactly know why either.

But initially Bill disagrees. There are many possible reasons for Bill's position, just as there are many possible reasons for Marge's.

Compromise is much easier to find when people negotiate from key interests rather than from rigid positions. For instance, Bill's interests and Marge's interests might both be satisfied if Bill fixed dinner, or if they called out for pizza rather than going to a restaurant. Characters can take conflicting positions even though their interests are not in conflict at all.

Such gracious compromise sounds so very reasonable! But people—or characters—are not always reasonable. And of course many conflicts are more complicated than getting dinner. Shifting an actual conflict from positions to interests can be difficult. There are plenty of reasons why people cling to positions they have taken. Characters can be stubborn or proud. Characters can be afraid that compromise will make them look weak. Some deeply competitive characters will dig in and refuse to budge even on minor issues and despite real costs to themselves: their need to be in control trumps every other need they might have. Secretive or deeply private characters may be reluctant to reveal their interests.

Characters can also fail to recognize what they have at stake in a conflict. Characters who are neither self-aware nor introspective may know *what* they want—but not why. They are not fully aware of what they have at stake. Characters who are not intuitively sensitive to others' perceptions may take a position that unnecessarily riles someone else—who retaliates punitively (and without forethought). Characters who are deeply conventional in their thinking can lock down on what "should" happen without considering whether some other outcome would be better for everyone concerned. Characters constrained by their upbringing can cling to rigid ideas about the role they must play in a given situation: as a parent, as a boss, as a spouse, as an upstanding church member, and so forth.

Characters like these can be both blind and bullheaded. But if something happens that eventually brings them to their senses, the conflict can be resolved.

3. Why Does It Matter? Behind our key interests are the overarching values that come into play in a conflict. Values are the third layer of human motives. These values can be moral norms such as honesty, responsibility, respect, fair play, duty, or compassion. They can be interpersonal commitments—promises made, roles and obligations established over time, or trust earned through shared experience.

Assume for a moment that Marge's interest in going out to dinner is her desire for her husband's undivided attention. Behind that desire is one of Marge's core values: her keen sense of responsibility. She doesn't know how to handle a situation at work, and so she wants Bill's advice. Going out to eat will let her discuss this matter out of earshot of their teenage children. Behind Bill's position (not going out to dinner) and behind his interest in that position (not spending the money), there is also some key value at stake for Bill.

Knowing what values are at stake can provide an even richer and more satisfying basis for compromise and conflict resolution. Bill and Marge might compromise easily on the basis of some strongly shared value, even though initially they took different positions and they had different key interests at stake.

But of course, whatever makes for richer, more satisfying compromise can also make for deeper, darker, more virulent conflict. For Bill, perhaps frugality means safety, and

Marge's position feels threatening. For Marge, perhaps eating out together affirms intimacy, and Bill's refusal feels threatening. If those are the core values at stake, and neither character is capable of compromise, then this conflict goes far beyond dinner. It can spiral out to encompass the entire marriage, especially if the characters are not entirely aware of what's going on between them at this moment.

Any of us are more willing to accept "no" for an answer when there are honest and morally serious reasons for that reply. And in parallel ways, we are more willing to go along with others, despite our initial disagreement, if they have solid and persuasive reasons for their position. But as negotiators explain repeatedly, most people are not innately conscious of their own reasoning at this deeper level. Something—or someone—has to lead them to that awareness. Storytellers call it "plot."

At the moment when Marge says, "let's eat out," who knows what's really going on? Who knows what values are at stake here? The characters might not know. The reader might not know. But the author knows, or the author can know. Knowing our characters' core values can help us to create sequences of scenes that gradually reveal the complexity of the problems they face—and the complexity of who they are as well. Ultimately, the solution to their problems must come from within them.

3. Wiring the Hot Buttons of Core Identity. Compromise is particularly difficult when the conflict at hand engages core issues of personal identity. Identity issues are the fourth layer of human motive, after positions, interests, and values. If either Bill or Marge were to blow up instantaneously over the question of eating out, chances are that the conflict has hit a core issue of personal identity. We all have these hot buttons, and they can create chronic tensions in our major relationships. When chronic tensions are high, even the most trivial event can spark an explosion.

Some negotiators argue that the most commonly troublesome identity issues can be defined as three questions: Am I a good person? Am I competent? Am I worthy of love? Such questions matter to everyone. Does Marge feel unloved if Bill balks at going out? Does Bill feel incompetent that he doesn't earn enough to eat out on a whim? Do both of them feel guilty or ashamed about having this argument in the first place?

Other negotiators describe these troublesome identity issues as core emotional needs

that everyone has. Such needs come into play in every conflict; they are the raw stuff from which plots are built. Here's a list of these core needs:

1. We need to be appreciated: we need other people to value both what we are doing and what we are thinking or feeling. We will be irked—or perhaps outraged--if others take us for granted.

2. We all need to belong. We need to be included whenever something significant is going on or being decided. An important, unexpected exclusion rankles most of us. For some, it's a huge affront.

3. We all need autonomy. We want to belong--but not to be ordered around. We want the freedom to make our own decisions on important matters, although what counts as "important" will vary from one person to the next.

4. We are all concerned at some level about our role in a group. Often that concern boils down to anxiety about our status, but status is not the only thing that matters. People can be deeply attached to the roles that they play or the turf that they manage, even when these things might seem very small or insignificant to others.

Although everyone has this array of needs, each character will be more sensitive on some issues than on others. Knowing our characters' hot-button anxieties can help us to create scenes of authentic, engaging tension without losing control of the conflict.

5. Designing Personalities. One good source for help in sketching identity issues realistically is a branch of psychology called personality theory. According to psychologists, a personality trait is an aspect of behavior and disposition that persists across a lifetime and despite changes in circumstance or social context. (The Myers-Briggs types are much less stable.) Classically, there are five such traits:

1. extraversion (with its opposite, introversion)

2. neuroticism (the frequency with which one is moody and negative) 3. conscientiousness (sense of duty; sense of responsibility)

4. agreeableness (the willingness or perhaps the ability to get along with others)

5. openness to experience (willingness to learn, to try something new, or to consider a new angle on an issue; comfort with change)

Each of us is at some more-or-less point on each of these traits: more or less moody, more or less open to change, and so forth.

Some conflicts between characters will be situational or situation-specific; in other settings or at less stressful moments, these two characters might get along just fine. For instance, moderate introverts and moderate extraverts are often drawn to one another and enjoy stable relationships—except under high stress. If Marge is more extraverted, her default under stress will be to seek social interaction. If Bill is more introverted, his default under stress is to withdraw. If they don't understand this about one another, there's trouble ahead.

Some conflicts arise from the clash of two structurally incompatible personalities. Imagine, if you will, a grumpy older introvert who is deeply set in his ways thrust into in a crisis situation with an agreeable, highly conscientious young extravert who keeps suggesting fundamental changes to "how things have always been" in order to solve the problem they face together. Will they drive each other crazy? Will the young extravert win over the grumpy introvert by being so responsible and friendly? Or will the young extravert have a coming-of-age recognition that maybe the old grump knows a thing or two?

It can be great fun to play around in this way with the five major personality traits of the characters we are inventing. Taking time to do so can also help us to devise realistic characters who are capable of changing in surprising ways. These changes can be both authentic and well-grounded if we have provided hints of the redeeming trait in earlier scenes.

5. Building the Backstories. For the purposes of conflict management in a story, the key aspect of personal history is how characters' hot-button issues were wired into place by haunting experiences earlier in life—especially during childhood and adolescence. Children are often trapped in constrained social roles with parents, classmates, stronger siblings, and so forth. As all of us have seen, individuals can repeat these constraints in other relationships later in life.

For instance, a woman who grew up trying to appease her critical mother may go through life deferring to the demands of other people. A man who grew up trying to engage his distant father may go through life seeking attention. Many people grow up with patterns of behavior that are self-defeating: the positions they take are too often at odds with their own rational interests and values.

Any storyteller intuitively understands this. But we can make our intuitions more fully conscious if we stop to imagine our characters' emotional or psychological history. What conflicted relationships or painful experiences account for their most sensitive hot buttons or self-defeating behaviors? Even if this bit of backstory never shows up in the story we tell, our knowing it can help us create three-dimensional characters.

It may also help us to craft satisfying resolutions to conflicts: people can escape the pressure of their personal history if they find the courage to overcome the fears driving their self-defeating choices. Helping people to muster up that courage and take those steps is how cognitive-behavioral therapists earn a living. Long before there were such therapists, however, there were good friends—loving, sharp-eyed, plain-spoken friends who point out truths that friends need to recognize. All of us depend upon friends like that. And our characters can as well. A truth-telling friend who recognizes the relevance of backstory can be doubly useful for the narration.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Writers are often told to decide ahead of time what colors their characters like or what foods they have in their kitchens, what hobbies they have or what kinds of pets. That can be one way of getting to know the figures we have created in our minds. But such details are simply lists of random traits unless they are coherently rooted in the personalities, needs, fears, moral values, and histories of the characters. One good way to devise complex, engaging characters is to map their six levels of motives for the parts they play in the conflicts driving the plot.

Once that has been mapped, we can select details that reveal some of the depths we have imagined. Bill is very proud of his Ford with 137,000 miles and not a spot of rust. His desk once belonged to his great-grandfather, who founded the company Bill now runs. Once a year, Bill spends a whole weekend polishing that desk with lemon oil and

beeswax and a stack of soft white rags. Marge is a mouse of a woman, thin and frizzy and frazzled, but she is a meticulously careful bookkeeper for the local college. She never initiates anything—and especially not change. For her to propose a weeknight dinner out on the spur of the moment is utterly out of character. Bill is startled; he balks. Marge bursts into tears. Bill backs up and opens the front door, giving in with a wordless gesture. They spend hours driving around, talking, ending up not at a restaurant but in the driveway of Bill's CPA.

Understanding our characters' motives can help us to create real trouble—and to resolve these problems in a satisfying way before the last page is turned.

Sidebar: Bibliography

Each of these books offers dozens of little case studies. It can be both fun and useful as an exercise to use these vignettes to sketch a series of scenes—perhaps even a short story—with more fully realized characters.

Fisher, Roger, William Ury, and Bruce Patton. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In.* 2nd ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

On discovering the interests behind the position a person (or a character) takes amidst a conflict.

Fisher, Roger, and Daniel Shapiro. *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate.* New York: Viking, 2005. On the core emotional needs underlying most conflicts

Lerner, Harriet. *The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships.* New York: HarperCollins, 1985.

-------- *The Dance of Intimacy: A Woman's Guide to Courageous Acts of Change in Key Relationships.* New York: HarperCollins, 1989.

--------- *The Dance of Deception: A Guide to Authenticity and Truth-Telling in Women's Relationships.* New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

-------- *The Dance of Connection: How to Talk to Someone when You're Mad, Hurt, Scared, Frustrated, Insulted, Betrayed, or Desperate.* New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

Each of Lerner's books profiles an array of individuals trapped by behavior patterns established in childhood; she explains how they worked their way free by facing the problem squarely and then figuring out what to say, what to do, and how to cope with the consequences.

McAdams, Dan P. *Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self.* New York: The Guilford Press, 1993. Each developmental stage makes its own distinctive contribution to the story we tell of who we are. A fascinating appendix offers interview questions to consider in creating a backstory that is authentically related to a character's key psychological issues as an adult.

Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin, 1999. On how the three key questions about self-worth issues are both rooted in backstory and visible in complicated conflicts.

Ury, William. *The Power of a Positive No: Save the Deal, Save the Relationship--and Still Say No.* New York: Bantam, 2007. A particularly rich explanation of how differences in core personal values can both generate conflicts and make resolution possible.

Sidebar: Workout*

Fill out a form like this for each major character

Position:

Interest:

Core Value:

Hot Button anxiety least <---------> most

good person ?	1 2 3 4 5
competent?	1 2 3 4 5
loveable?	1 2 3 4 5
appreciated?	1 2 3 4 5
included?	1 2 3 4 5
autonomous?	1 2 3 4 5
sufficient status?	1 2 3 4 5
role respected?	1 2 3 4 5

Personality Traits most <---> middling <----> most

extravert	3 2 1 2 3	introvert
sunny	3 2 1 2 3	moody

flakey 3 2 1 2 3 responsible

abrasive 3 2 1 2 3 gets along with others

not open to change 3 2 1 2 3 open to change

Haunting memory or relationship: