

Creating High Stakes in the Novel # 3

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The students in my novel-writing courses often think that all they need are some quirky details (“a woman of a certain age who always wears polka-dots and raises Basenjis”) or a few changes in an autobiographical character (“like the author, Johnny went to Vietnam at a young age”). Quirky can be good (though usually not too quirky), and it is probably impossible to avoid some autobiographical elements, but for characters to be believable and sympathetic, they must possess more than a collection of character traits.

Start with a CENTRAL PROBLEM. Above all, the protagonist of a novel must have a **central problem** that is solved during the course of the plot. It is this problem that **motivates** the character, that explains **why and how** she does what she does—and that enables the reader, who also acts based on her own problems in life, to **identify** with the character.

- **Answer the “So What?” Problem.** To focus on the problem, it’s helpful to ask yourself: What does the character want? Put another way: What is at stake? Your protagonist must have one overriding want that is so important that there will be **serious consequences** if she does not get it.
- **Balance Inner and Outer Problems.** One way to help make your character multidimensional is to be sure that in addition to a central problem, the character also possesses clear inner and outer conflicts.
- **How Does Your Character Grow or Change?** The resolution of inner conflict leads to change in attitude; the resolution of outer conflict leads to change in circumstance.
- **Pile on the difficulties.** Readers will feel fear and sympathy for your character as things get worse, then cheer for her as she overcomes all the obstacles you place in her path.
- **Make your character the agent.** Your character may have one or more sidekicks, but he is the one who must solve the most pressing problems, especially the one that leads to the resolution of the book.
- **Be willing to change your own ideas.** Some writers start out with protagonists who are obsessed, angry, or worse, don’t care about much of anything. They argue that by the end of the novel the character is better, more compassionate, etc. The problem is that few readers will stick around long enough to watch the transformation occur. You may need to alter your character’s trait in order to make him more sympathetic.

Eleven Elements of a Scene

1. Character
2. POV (point of view)
3. Setting (place)
4. Time Barrier
5. Purpose (Why)
6. Sight
7. Sound
8. Taste
9. Smell
10. Touch
11. Quality of Light (cloudy, dark, bright)

Scenes are a novelist's bread and butter. Scenes move faster than narration or exposition. Dialogue moves fastest of all.

The five senses lend Concrete Sensory Detail (CSD) to a scene, helping the reader to "be" there.

Always orient your reader to the who what where and when.

Be sure you know the why of the scene.

Give scenes a beginning, a middle and an end.

The POV character should win, lose or seldom, the scene ends in a draw.

The scene must give vital information to the central story or move it forward in some way.