

Conflict:
the key to
writing
your novel

In this extract from *Writing a Novel: Bring Your Ideas to Life the Faber Academy Way* by Richard Skinner (Director of Fiction at Faber Academy), you'll learn how to include this key ingredient from the outset of planning your novel...

If plot is the engine of a narrative, its heart, then the idea of ‘conflict’ is its heartbeat

Put simply: without ‘conflict’ there is no drama, and without drama there is no story. If the fact that a character will find success is never in doubt, there is no interest or involvement for the reader. The gap between desire and its fulfilment is what drives the story and keeps us reading.

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For writers commencing a novel for the first time, conflict is often overlooked. Very often in the case of new writers, when there is a change in a character’s circumstances, this change is brought about extremely easily and without much opposition or many obstacles. Hey presto! Just like that, the character has everything that they have always dreamed of and none of this has come about through their own hard work or at any cost to themselves. It is all too easy.

The effect of this is that the story feels thin and undeveloped, and there can be a predictability to the story that turns it into an undemanding read. The main character might be exposed to drama and tragedy, but the experience does not seem to run too deeply within them. They remain unmarked by events and unmoved by encounters. This

makes the reader feel that your main character has no ‘inner life’, no depth. This is especially true when the character’s main goal, the whole purpose for their being, has been built up over a significant amount of time, only to be dispatched in the blink of an eye. We are left feeling underwhelmed, to say the least.

Furthermore, if this lack of conflict within a character also occurs between all the characters in a novel, things can get very dull indeed. If the text is comprised solely of people being nice to each other, exchanging pleasantries, making arrangements, the reader will become bored stiff and will switch off. Happiness does indeed write white.

In order to avoid all of this, you need to put obstacles in the character’s path to make life difficult for them. So, for instance, if you want a character to become rich, the first thing you should do is rob them. Their progress cannot be too smooth, so put things in their way in order to prevent them from getting what they want. A locked door, a choice between two lovers, a mistake rued. Each obstacle presents a character with a psychological threshold and, when they reach and pass through that threshold, they are transformed into a different person.

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The trick is to make these obstacles seem insurmountable, but to have the character overcome them anyway. The greater the conflict, the more impressive the effort and eventual outcome. The conflict does not have to be on a

grand scale – war, for instance – and every decision does not have to be life-or-death. Conflict can be internal and much quieter, existing on a quotidian level, small scale, as it does in Anita Brookner’s *Hotel du Lac*, in which the mind of the main character, Edith Hope, is fully explored as she evaluates herself, how she believes her friends see her, how Mr Neville sees her, and how she eventually sees herself in the light of her experiences at the hotel. Despite Edith’s unassuming and self-effacing persona, she privately believes that she has inherited her father’s strength of character; by the end of the book, however, she is not too sure.

Conflict within a novel can work on many levels. First of all, there is ‘personal’ conflict, the fight a person has with themselves. This may be the struggle for spiritual enlightenment, as in the case of Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, or it might be the result of a dissatisfaction (as it is for Emma Bovary), or a ‘disaffection’ – Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, for example. The point is that the main character feels some kind of ‘lack’, something wanting inside them that drives them to change their state of being. The stories that work on this kind of conflict can be insightful existential ‘portraits’ of individuals and often produce great character studies.

Secondly, there is ‘interpersonal’ conflict, the conflict between two people who, for whatever reason, do not see eye to eye. It could be within a marriage, between a pair of aluminium salesmen in 1950s Baltimore (*Tin Men*), or among soldiers, as in *Platoon*, in which the two sergeants

fight over the soul of a greenhorn GI. This kind of conflict is at its most heightened when it is based on a protagonist and an antagonist who have mutually exclusive goals, so that, if the protagonist achieves what they set out to do, it is at the expense of the antagonist, and *vice versa*. One very common example of this kind of conflict is the story of the ‘hunter and the hunted’, which is the template for countless *Boys’ Own* adventure stories: Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, for instance, or Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, in which Javert mercilessly and relentlessly pursues Valjean.

A more recent novel that is a good example of conflict is Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*. During the novel, Billy Parham crosses the US–Mexico border three times: the first time to release a wolf back into the wild; the second to recover his father’s horses; the third to search for his brother. Each time he crosses the border, he loses something – the wolf, the horses, his brother – and he returns home empty-handed. In turn, each loss necessitates that he cross the border again. It is a magnificent novel and one of the best embodiments of pure conflict that I know.

Finally, there is ‘social’ conflict, which arises between one person and a whole community. In general, this type of story is the result of differently held views, whether it be an individual’s non-conformist approach to life (*Crime and Punishment*, for example), or the result of a person maintaining their integrity in the face of great hostility, as in the film *12 Angry Men*. The permutations are endless, but all

stories with this level of conflict have in common the idea of ‘one person against the world’.

There is another level of conflict, namely that between man and his environment, but as the subject of these stories is usually some form of natural phenomenon, they typically do not pay much attention to character. This kind of conflict is to be found in movies such as *Twister*, *Volcano* and *Armageddon*.

One of the reasons the books that make up the Western ‘canon’ have endured is because they usually work on more than one of these levels; indeed, some of them work on all three. The initial conflict in *Madame Bovary*, for example, is that Emma Bovary is unhappy with her lot. She believes she deserves a better hand than life has dealt her and she begins to take this frustration out on her husband. Although her husband is loyal, tension grows between them. After two desultory affairs, she has debts that she cannot repay. Her name is tarnished and rumours begin to spread about her affairs. She sinks further into debt and is shunned by the villagers. Her original dissatisfaction has spread out and infected the lives of those close to her and contaminated the community she lives in. Rather than face up to her problems, she drinks arsenic and dies a horrific death.

*‘Writing this book I am like a man playing the piano
with lead balls attached to his knuckles.’*

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT ON *Madame Bovary*

Try this for yourself. Here are the beginnings and endings of three stories. Put in six key events to make it difficult for the characters to get from the beginning to the end. So, beginning scene, then events 1 to 6, then the end scene:

- 1 A man kills a landlady on a whim and ends up falling in love with a prostitute while serving time.
- 2 A poor man falls in love with a woman but, many years later, ends up being shot while in a swimming pool.
- 3 A young girl is taken in by a 'noble' family but ends up being surrounded by police on a heath.

These three examples are actually the beginnings and endings of famous novels – did you recognise them? The first is *Crime and Punishment*; the second *The Great Gatsby*; and the third is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

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About the author

Richard Skinner is a novelist, poet and critic. As Director of the Fiction Programme at Faber Academy, he created our Writing a Novel course in 2009 and since then has helped hundreds of writers find their voice. Buy his writing guide, *Writing a Novel: Bring Your Ideas to Life the Faber Academy Way* at [Waterstones](#), [Amazon](#), or [bookshop.org](#). Richard also teaches Faber Academy's **Masterclasses**, a series of ten intensive online evening workshops distilled from his years of teaching creative writing.

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