

NOVEL WRITING BASICS

# Conflict & Suspense

INTRIGUE + TENSION



**STORY: What Happens**  
**DRAMA: Why It Matters**

*If the story doesn't matter, why should readers care?*

**Drama:** conflict, suspense and intrigue on every page.





# CONFLICT IS NOT VIOLENCE

**Real conflict = risk + uncertainty.**

Intrigue and suspense are caused by ***unresolved answers*** about ***unresolved conflict***. You need to show the conflict and consequences to show that the protagonist may face real risk and danger.



# WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

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## Tension:

Let the risk and danger of actual conflict grow quietly. Don't let it out. Hold it in. Let it build until it *can not* be contained.

## Intrigue:

If readers aren't asking questions, they aren't interested. You get them interested by showing characters they care about, and revealing the dangers.



# WHEN TO REVEAL INFORMATION

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Make them ask the question, before you give them the answer.

***Intrigue:*** withhold info. ***Suspense:*** show the danger.

**Timing:** readers learn when characters learn.

If it's important to your story (= it has emotional relevance to your characters and may influence their actions or reactions) don't SHOW it, HIDE it – show its *absence*. Have the question raised but *refuse* to answer. The more important the information, the less easy it should be for readers to access it.



# RED FLAGS

If you don't have conflict, suspense, intrigue and tension – readers will quit reading or get bored.



## POV JUMPING

Sympathy / Timing  
*Unresolved Conflict*



## BACKSTORY

If this already happened, it doesn't matter (no real stakes).



## BAIT & SWITCH

Hook them hard but then change topics and expect them to care.  
More stakes = more frustration.  
Dreams or flashbacks.  
Main story (largest conflict)



Don't let characters sit and talk to each other. This will quickly answer/resolve story questions with too much information or backstory.

**Interrupt them!**

If they have time to make small talk about trivial events that didn't have an emotional impact on them, it means your plot is too slow or stakes are too low, because your characters **SHOULD** need or want something much more pressing than getting to know each other or reviewing things that happened earlier. (Unless it's part of a discussion that helps them make a choice on how to respond to events.)



# WHEN TO ADD BACKSTORY

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Real story is unresolved conflict; the resolution hasn't happened yet; the danger is real. **Backstory** is concluded action that has no teeth; there's no real danger, so there's no real suspense or intrigue. The results are known (but this could be a crucial reveal – the conflict is in the reaction).

- 1: after risky/dangerous scene (slow after fast)
- 2: with some action/scene
- 3: deepen emotional attachment to worsen pain (more at stake)
- 4: justify character motivations

**How to know if it's backstory:** who is giving this information right now, and why?

- X just thinking out loud to themselves
- X telling someone who already knows
- X the narrator talking to readers while characters stand still





A person stands on a rocky shore, looking out at a calm lake. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a large, glowing orb in the sky. The background features rolling hills and mountains under a warm, golden light. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# OBSTACLES

CHALLENGES & DIFFICULT DECISIONS

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- 01. Outer Conflict**, challenges or obstacles that prevent the character from achieving goals
- 02. Inner Conflict**, moral struggles, decisions, guilt or shame, anger
- 03. Friendly Fire** (betrayal). Strong disagreements between allies or supporting characters.



# SCENE

## CHECKLIST

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- **What happens, then stop** (scene break) – take a breath
- Change or Reveal (action or new info)
- Motivation (what do the characters need/want and why)
- The most pressing thing replaces the big thing
- What's stopping them? Opposition: 3 hurdles/obstacles
- Reaction, new plan, event
- 3x conflict (light the fuse – two irresolvable opposites that create friction)
- Tension (pull the string)
- Snapshot (picture it!)
- Momentum (urgency) – why does this have to happen NOW?
- Relevancy: Does this matter to the REAL story conflict or quest?
- Fulfilling the promise of the premise.

