

# Lesson 1: Prepping Your External Plot for a Story with Purpose

## Objective

In this lesson you will work on gathering the pieces you need to make your external plot work. You will use these elements throughout the following lessons to plot your novel.

## What You Will Learn

- How to create your story's conflict
- How to choose a goal for your hero
- Why your hero needs a motive

## Preparing the External Plot

Before you can plot your story, you need to figure out what your plot will be about. Or rather *who*. Remember, a story is about a character who goes on a journey to achieve a goal and runs into conflict.

To get started, you need to cast your two most important characters: The first is your hero, the character who this whole story will be about. The second is your villain, the character who will create the opposition for your hero.

Now in some stories, the opposition may not be a person. The opposing force can also take the form of nature, an animal or monster, society, fate or God, technology, or the hero's inner self. Anything that stands in the way of your hero's goal is an opposing force. For this course we will be focusing on using a person (aka a villain) as the opposing force since it's the most common choice, but the principles you will learn for creating conflict by using a villain can be applied to other opposing forces as well.

Once you know who your hero and villain will be, you need to figure out what they both want. What your hero wants will serve as the goal of the story. A goal brings focus and purpose to your plot and keeps it from wandering and getting off track. A goal also creates meaning and prevents your scenes from becoming a random string of pointless events that don't go anywhere. In this lesson we're going to focus on goals that come from the external action of the plot, and in the next lesson we will look at how goals can also come from internal desires.

Your hero and villain should want opposite things. Their opposing goals will create the external conflict of your story. This conflict is absolutely crucial. Without conflict, you have no story. If nothing goes wrong, if there's no problem, there's no story. No one wants to hear about how awesome Mary's vacation to Hawaii was. That's a summary. But if a volcano exploded during her trip and she narrowly escaped with her life, that's a story.

Let's take a look at how opposing goals can create conflict. So for example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's goal is to destroy the ring, while Sauron's goal is to steal it back and use its

power to take over Middle Earth. These opposing goals create a sort of chess match between hero and villain; one makes a move towards his goal, the other makes a countermove to stop him, and so on.

In his book “Techniques of the Selling Writer,” Dwight Swain explains that a character’s goal usually falls into one of three categories:

- (1) *Possession of something*...a girl, a job, a jewel; you name it.
- (2) *Relief from something*...blackmail, domination, fear.
- (3) *Revenge for something*...a slight, a loss, a betrayal.

Frodo’s goal of destroying the ring would fit into the second category—he wants to relieve Middle Earth from the threat of Sauron and also relieve himself from the burden of carrying the ring as it begins to take a toll on him. The external plot is all about how Frodo goes about destroying the ring and achieving his goal.

To give you some more ideas of what a goal might look like, screenwriter Michael Hague says there are five main goals:

1. The need to win (competition, the love of another, etc.)
2. The need to stop (someone, something bad from happening, etc.)
3. The need to escape (from captivity, an abusive relationship, etc.)
4. The need to deliver (a message, one’s self, an item, etc.)
5. The need to retrieve—(a magic ring, a hidden or lost treasure, a lost love, etc.)

So in this instance, Frodo’s goal could fall under either the need to stop Sauron from taking over Middle Earth, or the need to deliver the ring to Mount Doom and destroy it.

The external goal usually comes from the external action of your story. Frodo needs to destroy the ring. Katniss needs to win the Hunger Games. Harry needs to defeat Voldemort. Luke Skywalker needs to destroy the Death Star. To find this external goal, you will need to have some idea of your story’s main concept and begin brainstorming ideas for the conflict. Then, ask yourself, what does your hero want? What does he need to achieve?

So for example, when I wrote my novella *These Savage Bones*, I started with the concept that I was going to write a murder mystery centered around the Day of the Dead. Naturally, then, my hero’s external goal became catching the murderer.

Before we go further, I also want to point out that sometimes your hero’s goal can change throughout the story. If you find this happening, don’t panic—it’s completely fine. So for example, let’s say your story is about an assassin sent to kill a princess. But at some point in the story, he ends up falling in love with her. His goal then changes from killing her to protecting her from whoever hired him. Whether your hero’s goal changes or stays the same, the important thing is that your hero has a goal to pursue in the first place.

## Motive and Stakes

But it's not good enough for your hero to just want something—there also needs to be a reason behind *why* he wants it. This creates your hero's motive and stakes.

Let me ask you a question: What happens if your hero doesn't achieve her goal? What does she stand to lose? Her job? Her family? Her home? This is what's at stake, and what's motivating her to keep going when things get tough. It gives her a reason to stand and fight when it would be easier and safer to turn and run. The stakes should be something the hero cares about and should affect her personally.

So in *The Lord of the Rings*, what happens if Frodo doesn't destroy the ring? Well, Sauron will get ahold of it and take over Middle Earth. Not only is Frodo's life at stake, but so is his home, his loved ones, and his entire world.

Stakes create tension and keep the reader anxious to find out whether or not the hero will achieve his goal. They also give the reader a reason to care. Stakes tell the reader why this goal matters. If you can make your reader care about your hero and your hero's goal, then they will be emotionally invested in your story.

Once you know who your hero is, his goal, what's at stake, and the opposition standing in his way, you're almost ready to begin plotting your story. But before you do that, you will also need to prepare your story's internal plot, which we will cover in the next lesson.

## Key Takeaways

- A story is about a character who goes on a journey to achieve a goal and runs into conflict.
- A goal brings focus, meaning, and purpose to your plot.
- Conflict is created when an opposing force stands between the hero and something she wants.
- Without conflict, there's no story. There must be a problem or something that goes wrong.
- The hero's goal usually comes from the external action of the story's main concept.
- The hero's goal can sometimes change throughout the story.
- The hero needs to be motivated to achieve his goal by what's at stake if he fails.
- Stakes tell the reader why the goal matters and why they should care.

## Your Assignment

Using the questions on pages 5 & 6 in your workbook as a guide, begin brainstorming your hero's goal, opposition, and motivation.