

Notes on Lajos Egri's Art of Creative Writing

1. *Universal Man*

Every type of creative writing depends on the credibility of a *character*.

Whatever a character does or says, he does or says for only two reasons:

1. To create sympathy for himself.
2. To show how important he is.

2. *What Is Originality?*

Originality means the *beginning* of something.

A story is outstanding because of its *character portrayals*. Your characters must be people we all know and recognize ourselves in them. As an author, you must know your characters intimately, and with a few bold strokes or with detailed drawing, make them come to life.

In the arts there are originators of new slants, new approaches, new surprising twists, but very few artists ever bring forth such original creations as Einstein's relativity. Originality is rare in the field of literature, so don't get locked up in trying to be totally original.

If originality is almost non-existent, what should a writer strive for? **Characterization**. Living, vibrating human beings are still the secret and magic formula of great and enduring writing.

3. *Emotion: Source of Reader Identification*

Great stories don't necessarily deal with outlandish characters. What makes a story great is that we recognize the characters as real flesh-and-blood human beings. How?

1. Make your reader identify your character as someone she knows.
2. Make the reader imagine what is happening to the character could happen to him.

This permeates the situation with aroused emotion. Readers will experience a sensation so great that they will not feel as if they are spectators, but rather participants of an exciting drama.

To write successfully, you must be able to create **identification**. To do that, you must understand and know your characters first. Establish identification through *emotion*. You can easily establish reader identification with your characters if the characters create – or are subjected to – emotions that we all immediately recognize. Fear, humiliation, love, hate, betrayal.

You must also have *suspense*, the suggestion that the story will grow in intensity. Emotion without suspense is wasted energy. You might start gently to arouse emotion in the reader, but your success or failure will depend on whether you can sustain the rising emotion, which also corresponds with rising suspense.

Hate or love, treachery or loyalty, spring from one and the same source: **insecurity**. All human emotion and conflict, in fact, whether personal, national, or international, spring from the same source: *insecurity*.

Emotion is a weapon to safeguard our lives. It spells out for our survival the basic tenet of our experience – *insecurity* – which prompts us to safeguard our existence at any cost. *All emotions are subsidiaries of insecurity*, which happens to be **self-preservation**, the prime mover of all human conduct.

The specter of danger haunting people in creative literature reminds us of our own safety. Whatever happened to others can happen to us. This is the reason that even the shadow of danger panics us and arouse our emotions.

Sure-fire Identification: When a man, woman, or child is *threatened* by fire, flood, earthquake, wild animals, spiritual predators, horrific creatures, loss, embarrassment, fear; when there is *hunger* for love, food, companionship, vengeance; when one is shy, orphaned, ill, abused, humiliated; when charity, humility, kindness, loyalty, courage and displayed – audiences will not fail to identify with your characters.

4. The Importance of Being Important

All creative writing, from its very beginning, grows from the root of the importance of being important.

Desire is a mild word for the strongest motivation there is. *Self-preservation* is the second.

Even if we make a mistake, it is really not our fault; we rationalize until we've convinced ourselves that the blame must fall on the other person. Why must we always be blameless and right? Because we are terribly *insecure*.

You cannot create a three-dimensional character without knowing why your characters do what they do. Motivation is endless, but it can be simplified if you accept the concept that *insecurity* is one of the most important and complex of all human emotions and conflicts.

Insecurity is the basic law of existence. All human emotions, good or evil, without exception, spring from this one eternal source. Without insecurity, there would be no progress; life would stand still. All cowardice or heroism, all human sacrifice happen because the authors of these deeds wish to annihilate the eternal, indestructible menace of our life – insecurity.

Importance is the first defense against insecurity. Great humility makes one important. So does great sacrifice.

A candidate for suicide must have more than one reason to believe that all the claims holding him to life are gone forever. He dies because he cannot be important any more. There are many reasons, one stacked upon another, and then the last straw that dashes the person into utter hopelessness.

No one is wholly satisfied with herself. Therefore, we are all looking for some kind of compensation. The differences between people lie in the severity of their own shortcomings. The degree of satisfaction with ourselves is determined by our physical make-up and our immediate environment. Hypersensitivity to the slightest disapproval usually springs from a weak body with a low physical resistance.

People constantly look for an outlet for their talents. They want to succeed, better themselves, to be noticed – to be important. Great **ambition** is usually a compensation for some deficiency in the person.

Insecurity hides in the most impossible places. The importance of being important is to hide **fear**, the child of insecurity, and mother of all human emotions.

Fear is always humiliating, for it shows naked insecurity. To show insecurity is to strip a person of his dignity. What is **dignity**? A camouflage for importance. To strip one of dignity, expose their insecurity, is to court abuse. Such a character, stripped and exposed, to cover his lost importance, starts to holler, to challenge, to accuse, to abuse, to show even bravery or viciousness when, in reality, he is frightened to death.

5. *The Shaping of Character* (good chapter)

First and foremost, you must understand your characters. Be they despicable or admirable, find out *and write down* what made them what they are today. Exploring character, past and present, can be fascinating. Written down on paper, it can itself suggest a story.

If you must create a character who will kill, you must assume the role of a personal God for that character. You must shape him, and then let him go. Watch as he stumbles, falls, gets up, kills – as if it is preordained that he will kill.

If you wish to establish that a child will become a murderer or serial killer when he grows up, you must stack the cards against him mercilessly in childhood. His tendency to kill most likely started even before he was conceived. How did his parents and experiences form him?

Overwhelming and burdening love for a person – a lover, parent, child, or friend – is always a sign of weakness, the sign of a fear of loneliness and of dependency. It warps the one loved.

The role of change is for the antagonist. (See The Art of Dramatic Writing.)

Before **jealousy**, there is suspicion; before suspicion, antagonism – the basis for growing hate. No one can be jealous without rancor.

An **ambitious** person is eager for honor, superiority, power, fame and wealth. Why? To cover up the inferiority which he is ashamed of. Inordinate ambition is the sign of greater than normal insecurity and the realization that the importance of being important is an absolute necessity for establishing his superiority over the common herd.

6. *Improvisation*

So you never knew a pimp, a policeman, a stuntwoman? How can you write a story with one of these characters? You can question her. Be his alter-ego and ask him questions as only an alter-ego could ask, or answer.

How to make your unlikely characters meet – p. 51.

In any type of creative writing, characters must be interdependent.

7. Character Contradiction

Socrates discovered the truth by the following method:

1. State the proposition.
2. Find a contradiction to that proposition and correct the proposition in light of it.
3. Repeat the procedure.

Thesis – antithesis – synthesis.

Inferiority is fear – fear of inadequacy. The greedy one, lacking emotional security, concentrates on economic superiority.

If humility helps us to create *sympathy*, or *importance*, we will put on the robe of humility and parade around in it as if humility were giving us the greatest joy in life.

Every **lie** must have some kind of base, a foundation, no matter how shaky, on which the liar can build. A fragment of a remark, a part of a piece of gossip is sufficient.

A character does seem to change under pressure. But underneath, in the recesses of the mind, ambition, or whatever else he things is important, breathes as fiercely as before. His goal, under any circumstances, is the drive, the urge to remain alive. This never changes! If we change, it is only in order to survive.

8. Forging the Unbreakable Bond

The right way to start a story is to engage your central character in *conflict*. Any character reveals himself in the shortest period of time during conflict.

Have opposites facing each other if you want to establish conflict from the very beginning. These opposite characters should be militant about their positions.

Matching different kinds of people against each other is called **orchestration**. Optimist vs. pessimist. Miser vs. spendthrift. Honest vs. dishonest. If they are exact opposites and both of them are militant, conflict is inevitable. Two perfectly orchestrated characters will be hellbent to oppose or perhaps even destroy each other if necessary.

If you have two militant characters opposed to one another, you have the foundation for a very good story. But before you start, find out *why* one cannot walk out on the other while the conflict rages. They must be tied by an **unbreakable bond** that keeps them together until the conflict reaches a climax.

The **premise** is a microscopic form of the story itself. Formulate a premise and start your story at a crisis which will be the turning point in your main character's life.

Any story can start from orchestration. Find out why they can't run away from each other in the middle of their struggle, formulate a premise, and you are ready to write your story.

Pit two militant and entirely different types of characters against one another, characters bound in an unbreakable union. As they struggle to break their bonds, they will naturally generate rising conflict in the process.

Take any character; find his opposite; figure out why they can't separate, although that is the very thing they desperately want to do; and you have a story!

People have nothing more precious to defend than their self-declared importance, and they will defend it with their last breath.

9. Where Do Writers Get Their Ideas?

Good writers look for *characters*, because ideas grow as freely from characters as apples from apple trees. An idea will never make a story, but a character will.

Writers who want to write good stories or plays must know their characters better than they know themselves. It is easier to create a living, three-dimensional character than an unreal, one-dimensional character. If your characters don't come to life, you don't know them well enough.

You can create a character that is totally normal, even thoroughly charming, but who has *one insignificant trait* that becomes disagreeable and hateful. If you have an unbending character, he will create his own story.

To create an original story, pick one individual with and outstanding trait. This person may embody all other virtues in existence, but they have one trait that makes them loveable or intolerable to live with. This character will *totally possess* one trait – one trait that is 100%. A *compulsive* trait. If you're writing about a self-centered man, don't make him just a little self-centered. Make his universe revolve around him alone. Other examples:

Analytical
Exacting
Fickle
Greedy
Immaculate

Conformist
Conniving
Systematic
Gullible
Over-generous

Hypersensitive
Egotistical
Kind
Shiftless
Opportunistic

Infallible	Materialist	Hypochondriac
Optimistic	Pessimistic	Obscene
Perverted	Self-righteous	Ruthlessly ambitious
Sensuous	Distrustful	Extroverted
Skeptical	Treacherous	Trusting
Snobbish	Frugal	Flighty
Spendthrift	Scrupulous	Stoical
Timid	Exhibitionistic	Extravagant
Unscrupulous	Vain	Vulgar
Visionary	Vindictive	Wasteful

You must present a character as an *individual*. No character is all black or white. **A tantalizing revelation occurs when an apparently decent and reliable human being exposes himself as an unreliable gambler without conscience or foresight, jeopardizing the life of the one who trusted him implicitly.**

Reversing the Procedure: Create a character who is despicable – unwholesome and treacherous. He is almost intolerably black, but he has one singular weakness that makes him human. For example, he is afraid to grow old. He is cruel to everyone he meets – except old people. He bends over backwards to be gentle and kind to them. Strangers observing his behavior would think he's a decent, admirable man. But those who really know him would never believe him capable of a single decent act.

The touchstone of great writing is to know your character and expose him from as many angles as possible. You can only do this if you know the character's background, his inherited characteristics, ambitions, hatreds, loves, his heroes, and all the big and little episodes of his life that could through a searchlight on the man as a whole.

Developing a Story:

1. Understand your characters thoroughly. Develop their backgrounds and rationalize all their motivations.
2. Forge an unbreakable bond between them.
3. Establish your **premise**, the goal of your protagonist.
4. Your character must be 100% of a particular trait, and compulsive about it.
5. Make your character act out of strong compulsion, but have him step into a miscalculation, which will incite the conflict.

6. The character must have an inborn or acquired compulsive drive to escape some kind of injury.

If you want your protagonist to *move*, he must act *compulsively* according to his trait, but makes a misstep that brings on trouble, moving him blindly and inevitably toward his destiny – heaven or hell. With the first wrong step they find themselves in trouble, sinking in quicksand. While they struggle to save their very lives, they find new and worse handicaps before them. It is not up to them any more whether they want to fight or not. They must – if they wish to survive.

The success or failure of fictional writing depends on the real misguided motivations of characters and the correct understanding by writers of the characters they intend to expose. Motivation is the key to understanding. Even a murderer has his own good reasons to do the deed. Motivation, justification, rationalization, vilification, and even distortion are the basis of human conflict.

Any idiosyncrasy, habit, phobia, or hypersensitivity in a character leads a writer to an important source of material. One single human trait could be the foundation for a gripping story. Whatever you want to say must be direct and compulsive in the character. A wishy-washy emotion or a vacillating directive will lead your manuscript to the wastebasket.

By exaggerating a character's compulsive trait, you point out the reader's own shortcomings.

Choose who dies... See p. 105.

Is there a human being who has no desire to be important? Such a one never lived.

10. Introduction to Motivation

Motivation, reduced to its simplest definition, means *why*. Motivation is that which prompts a character to *act* in a certain way. Every action must have a reason. As a writer you must constantly ask yourself *why* a character acts as he does. *You* must determine his motivation.

Emotions create motivation. Motivation moves behind all the personal turmoil that exists. It is the culprit responsible for all that has happened and all that will happen in your characters' lives. Nothing can happen without sound motivation.

Show motivation with imagination: a pregnant thought grows into determination; determination crystallizes into action. To motivate is to instigate, to incite action, to induce to reason, to stimulate. Motivation can spring from many sources: love, hate, fanaticism, fame, wealth...

Motivation is cause and effect, action and reaction. Motivation causes your character to think a certain way, and to act according to that mindset. This causes an effect, a response. Other characters, because of their unique motivations, respond or react, setting off a chain of story events.

“No, he wasn't exactly ugly, but unfortunately he though he was, and this conviction made him what he became: a killer.” Prove it by showing motivation.

All types of motivation, conflict, rationalization, exaggeration, boasting, lying and nothing but instruments for man to protect his hard-earned importance. The basic source of all human emotion and all conflict is the eternal unquenchable thirst for *security* – in short, for *self-preservation*. Motivation for a character serves to build an enduring, all-embracing edifice called importance for his safety. When this edifice is attacked or erodes, he must shore it up however possible.

Every character must have a past, a present, and a future. The present is the child of yesterday, and the father of tomorrow.

The *sources* of all motivations are the *environment* and the *physical make-up* of the character. A character's sensitivity or his brutality, his attitude toward himself and toward the world is shaped by these two sources.

Environment: (sociology) “Environment is everywhere. It is the gray sky, and it is a stuffy apartment on the fifth floor of a tenement. The crying babies, the cursing mothers, the drunken fathers also belong, and perhaps they build a horror against squalling babies with eternally dirty, runny noses. I must remember the food Paul eats, his father, and his real mother, the grocery-store flat where he was conceived and then born, everything living and dead, all the noises he ever heard, all the smells he ever smelled, the lights and shadows, and the bedbugs in the beds, for all these are environment. Even the dreams that he dreamed, the thoughts he thought, are a part of the whole and of him.” (p. 118)

Environment is like a big, comfortable (or not so comfortable) bed, waiting for us the moment we are born. As our mental horizon widens, our environment becomes uncomfortable, but fear of the unknown still keeps us glued to the now-despised but familiar places.

“John Smith turned to religion not necessarily because he was intellectually limited, but because religion was around him in his home environment and easy for him to sue to his advantage.”

Physical Make-up: (physiology) A three-dimensional human being is not only influenced by his environment, but by his physical, personal make-up as well. This is heredity in all its aspects.

Every living soul is eternally searching and fighting for security – the touchstone, the kernel, the important source of all human emotion and conflict.

The character with bad judgment usually was ignorant of the subject concerning which he used his bad judgment.

Love is a physical and spiritual attraction. Yet in fiction, it is much more than this. It is more than compatibility. **Love is a character's firm belief that his beloved is absolutely devoted to him and this devotion gives him confidence in himself and in his future. Physical attraction plus compatibility plus the importance of being important plus the belief in this person's absolute loyalty add up to love.** In short, **love is security.**

Love includes begetting offspring and fighting for their safety. The sex urge is a very big part of love. It is really the "life urge" camouflaged as sex. When the last shimmering desire for sex is snuffed out, that man is as good as dead.

Love has the magic power to make the lowest of persons become the most important in the world.

Love is based on absolute **trust**, and trust means security against a hostile world. Trust cannot be forced, it must be earned. Trust automatically places each person on the position of becoming a leader or a follower for the mutual benefit of both.

Disappointment or loss of confidence in a partner is enough to start a slow transformation that will result in mistrust. **Mistrust** is a sure sign that love has started to wither. Lovers usually conceal their true characters during courtship. Confronted with the hardships of everyday living, over time, the masks come off and they reveal their true selves.

Falling out of love doesn't happen overnight. Yet, one day your character might realize with stark horror that she has been living with a man who is repulsive to her. She can't understand for the life of her how she could ever have fallen in love with such a person. It seems utterly fantastic that once upon a time she thought of him as the most gorgeous and angelic man who ever lived. Here are telltale symptoms that love is waning:

Lack of appreciation →	Lack of tenderness	Annoyance ↶
Nagging	Uncompromising attitude	Sarcasm
Regimentation	Indifference	Fault-finding
Rudeness	Belittling	Humiliation
Stinginess	Being taken for granted	Abuse
Tardiness	Lying	

These little, seemingly inconsequential symptoms are unnoticed at first, disguised as mild, polite annoyances. But they rapidly grow (transition) into barbed-wire naggings and poisoned sarcasms. They inevitably turn to hate.

Any hint of fault during courtship usually becomes a major issue after marriage. Here is a list of incompatible people types:

Frugal	↔	Spendthrift
Healthy	↔	Hypochondriac
Trusting	↔	Liar
Honest	↔	Dishonest
Vulgar	↔	Refined
Conventional	↔	Unconventional
Skeptic	↔	Believer
Flirt	↔	Retiring
Shiftless	↔	Systematic
Oversexed	↔	Undersexed
Materialistic	↔	Spiritual
Sloppy	↔	Meticulous
Moral	↔	Immoral
Conventional	↔	Unconventional
Responsible	↔	Irresponsible
etc.		

To have trusted a person with your love – with your life – and to have the object of your admiration turn out to be something objectionable evokes fear for your safety and your life. It threatens self-preservation.

Cowardice is not a permanent state. It changes with circumstances and with the moods these circumstances create. For a character to act bravely, even rashly, you must create the preliminary mood to motivate him to act that way. In an emergency, his action must happen swiftly. The character himself is powerless to create, to conjure up the mood. His internal make-up decides the result beforehand; the “spur-of-the-moment action” must be in him to begin with. In the end, he is only acting naturally.

Inferiority manifests itself in a million different ways. What will your character do to cover it up or relieve it? What will he do to *compensate*, to make himself feel important and secure?

“A man who is constantly bragging, boasting, belittling others, is perhaps aware of himself as a masterful superior person. What he’s not aware of is that in reality all these feelings of power and superiority are only compensations for the very opposite. Deep down inside he feels weak, helpless, childish, and the very moment when he tells us, ‘Look here, what a great guy I am,’ he’s really praying: ‘Don’t let them find out that I feel like a helpless child.’” (Erich Fromm, p. 170)

Disappointment, painful or not, is a necessary evil. One character will be wiser from it, while another will be crushed, never to recuperate from the blow.

Stinginess is really fear of tomorrow.

There is nothing small about being **disillusioned**. It means that our judgment was terribly wrong. We believed, we trusted, we loved someone who turned out to be something other than we bargained for.

Loyalty can exist when two or more people's interests so bind them together that life without the other seems impossible. Loyalty in all strata of society acts for the same reason: *self-preservation*. Usefulness gives birth to loyalty, but usefulness cannot be one-sided for long. The moment one realizes that the other party has stopped contributing his share, loyalty slowly shrivels up.

Hungry people feel loyalty to no one. **The character robbed of the privilege of becoming important in his own esteem or in the society he lives in, is a dangerous man.** The importance of being important is second only to self-preservation.

11. X-raying a Character

Heredity (physiology or physical make-up) is a vital aspect of character development. Heredity influences future personality.

The normal, intelligent person is one who has the ability to learn. Habitual criminals are retarded. They do not have the foresight to realize that they cannot win against the law. Such retarded people are born, not made, although environment also plays a major part in their malformation. With the retarded person, anger is usually impotent rage.

Even the lowest of the low have the desire to be noticed, to show off, to be important. Bravado, a death-defying stunt, even a murder, could be a superb substitute for importance. Man consciously or unconsciously would commit a hair-raising act just to impress someone else of his importance.

Appendix A. The Basic Principles of Writing

Your story must contain the following indispensable elements:

- Premise
- Pivotal character
- Character (three-dimensional)
- Unity of opposites
- Growth
- Orchestration

- Point of attack
- Conflict
- Transition
- Crisis
- Climax
- Resolution

Premise

The premise is the seed from which the story grows. It is a *thumbnail synopsis* of the story you want to write.

It is wise to formulate your premise first, before you begin writing, because you must know exactly what you want to say, why you want to say it, and how far you want to carry it.

If you wanted to write a story about **greed**, you need to know what you want to say about greed, and what direction the story will go. You could crystallize your story in a premise:

Greed leads to destruction.

Greed leads to humiliation.

Greed leads to isolation.

Greed leads to loss of love.

Capture the one that expresses your idea perfectly. Then you have your story in a nutshell.

Your premise should include the basic facts about the *character*, *conflict*, and *resolution*.

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Object</i>
Greed	leads to	destruction
Honesty	defeats	duplicity
<i>Character</i>	<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Resolution</i>

- The first part of the premise should represent **character**: honesty, dishonesty, selfishness, ruthlessness, false pride, etc.
- The second part should represent the **conflict**: dishonesty leads to exposure, ruthless ambition leads to destruction, etc.
- The third part should represent the **resolution or goal** of the story.

Therefore, **a premise is a goal**. If you know the end of your story before you start to write it, you are in a better position to write a *good* story.

Pivotal Character

Who is going to force your characters into action? The pivotal character.

The pivotal character forces the conflict from beginning to end in the story. He is the motivating power, the cause of conflict in your story. He is the heart of all stories, pumping in all the conflict.

He knows immediately what he wants. A selfish person is selfish when the story opens. He is *relentlessly* (compulsively) selfish. *The pivotal character is always relentless.* He has a duty to perform. He must force the conflict to the bitter end, never backing down in the middle of the story.

He is relentless because circumstances beyond his control force him to be relentless. If an honest man steals, it is not for thrill or luxury, but because his family is starving, or he needs money for an operation for his child. Whatever the reason, it must be a relentless one.

If the pivotal character stops forcing the conflict, the story grinds to a halt.

The pivotal character usually *wants change*. Why? Because he's *dissatisfied*. How? He is ruthlessly militant to either *change* or *maintain* his status quo. If he's a good pivotal character, he holds nothing sacred and feels that nothing can stop him from reaching his goal.

The pivotal character knows where he's going, and tries to force everyone to go his way. If the antagonist refuses to go along with him, it's not because the pivotal character didn't push him hard enough. The pivotal character is a stubborn individual who sees only his own goal.

The pivotal character is reactionary and militant. Only *great passion* makes a good pivotal character. This applies to good men as well as criminals. Here are some good pivotal characters:

He wants *revenge* on the man who ran away with his wife.

He *loves* a woman madly but must make money first to marry her.

He is *willing to give his life* for his country, which he *loves* more than anything.

He is *greedy*. His greed sprang from poverty. He *exploits* others because he fears hunger.

He will stop at nothing, will even *destroy* others to achieve his goal.

He *wants* to be a musician or a writer.

Character

Character is the stuff you have to work with to build stories.

Human beings have three dimensions:

1. Physiology
2. Sociology
3. Psychology

It's not enough to know that a character is rude. You must know *why*.

Physiology covers the *physical aspects* of your character – appearance and general health. A character's physical appearance can make him feel either secure or insecure. A healthy person reacts different to things than an unhealthy one does. Health makes a difference in his attitude toward life. Both looks and health affect his mental development, resulting in either an inferiority or superiority complex.

Sociology is *environment*. There is a great difference between children born in slums and those born in luxury. Environment means home life, marital status of parents, earning power, divorced, widowed, compatible, incompatible. How did the character's friends affect him, and how did he affect them? What schooling did he have? What was his attitude and aptitude in school, his favorite subjects? What kind of social life did he lead?

Psychological is the *result* of the previous two dimensions. It gives life to the ambitions, frustrations, temperaments, attitudes, and complexes of your character.

To understand the *actions* of a character, we must first find his *motivation*. Knowing intimately his formation in the above three areas will give you insight to his motivation. Develop this thoroughly, especially for your main character.

Unity of Opposites

In a story, each character must serve a purpose. She must be an integral part of the whole structure so that, if she is removed, the structure collapses.

Integrate every character into the story by creating a **bond** between the characters, what is known as the *unity of opposites*. These characters might oppose, even hate, each other (orchestration), but they cannot walk out on each other because they are united by a common bond. A wife hates her husband, but she doesn't divorce him because they have children, and she is dependent on him financially. (Children are not enough to stay divorce; there must be something else at stake – money, business, honor, reputation, revenge, blackmail, etc.)

What is the unbreakable bond between the characters? What is so much at stake that they can't leave each other? Make it logical and ironclad.

Ordinary love is not a good unity of opposites. The love must be great, deep, and death-defying if it is to serve as a strong enough bond.

Growth

To have your characters grow, you must feed them *conflict*. Conflict results from *contradiction*. Contradiction is the outgrowth of two strong wills, desperately straining against each other.

Contradiction, animosity, fear, jealousy, covetousness, hate, ruthless ambition – these are the ingredients that make conflict thrive. Conflict cannot grow and thrive without our feeding troubles and miseries to our characters. Then they must deal with it.

To rectify one wrong decision, they make another, then commit a third to fix the second, and so on. Some characters will eventually concede defeat. Others who are stubborn will never give up.

As a writer, you are only interested in characters who, by their physical and environmental make-up, are predestined to defy the odds and never quit. They are reckless. They try to achieve their goal, no matter what.

However, these ruthless people become desperate *only after dire necessity* forces them to a decision, and any delay in acting might cost them their lives, loves, wealth, health, or honor. Desperate necessity propels these characters toward their ultimate goal, which is clearly stated in the story's premise.

The greater the conflict in the characters' lives, the greater their growth. Pole-to pole growth, such as from jealous to trusting, from loyal to disloyal, and how it happens make the most exciting stories.

Orchestration

Contradictory characters pitted against each other, such as evil against just, clash while the *premise* acts as the unifying force that drives the contradictory characters toward their predestined ends. When contradictory characters are unified by a premise, you have *orchestration*.

If contradictory characters are militant in their beliefs and bound together by an unbreakable bond, you can produce great comedy or tragedy.

Point of Attack

The point of attack starts your story. Every story must open with a *crisis* which is the sole point of attack – in the life or lives or one or more characters. A *decision* must be imminent, and the characters must be ready to take *action*.

A married couple may have been happily married for ten years, then quarreled and threatened divorce for another ten. At what point in the marriage should the author start the story? *When one of them is about to make a decision; when the point of crisis is reached.*

Every story should start in the middle of the middle. **Start on the note of crisis.** If you want to catch the reader's attention immediately, start on a note of conflict.

Conflict

There are four types of conflict:

1. Foreshadowing (good)
2. Static (bad)
3. Jumping (bad)
4. Slowly rising (good)

Foreshadowing conflict should appear at the beginning of the story. The crisis is the hint or promise of future conflict. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the families are such bitter enemies that anyone in the respective households was ready to kill someone from the other.

Static conflict remains on an even keel, rising only momentarily. It is found only in *bad writing*! Arguments and quarrels create static conflict, unless the characters are growing and changing during the arguments. Every event, every line of dialogue, must further the action toward the final goal.

In **jumping** conflict, the characters jump from one emotional plane to another, eliminating the necessary transitional steps. This is also *bad writing*.

Avoid static and jumping conflict at all costs. To do so, you must know in advance what road your characters must travel:

- Drunkenness to sobriety
- Sobriety to drunkenness
- Timidity to brazenness
- Brazenness to timidity
- Simplicity to pretentiousness
- Fidelity to infidelity

The above represent **two poles**: the first is the starting point, the second is the arrival point.

Transition

You must have transitions between poles. Supposing a character is going to travel from love to hate. Let's assume there are seven emotional steps between the two poles:

1. Love
2. Disappointment
3. Annoyance
4. Irritation
5. Disillusionment
6. Indifference
7. Disgust
8. Anger
9. Hate

If a character goes from experiencing and showing 1 and then 4, this constitutes jumping conflict. You have neglected to show necessary transitional steps. **In fiction, every step must be obvious and clearly shown.** When your character goes through each step, 1 to 9, you have slowly rising conflict. Each step must be higher or more intense than the previous one, each scene gathering momentum until the final scene.

Crisis, Climax, Resolution

From beginning to end, a story is a series of crises, climaxes, and resolutions. It begins with a crisis and builds up from there. The **crisis** is the *turning point*, a time when a change is imminent. In childbirth, birth pains are the crisis, the birth is the climax, and the resolution is life or death of the child.

As the conflict in a story rises to meet each new crisis, climax, and resolution, you must keep building for the final crisis, climax, and resolution, which will be the sum total of all the preceding ones, *proving the premise*.

If each succeeding crisis does not rise on an ascending scale, the conflict becomes static.

The final crisis, climax, and resolution can follow each other in rapid order at the end of the story, or there can be an interval between them.

Appendix B. Summary

What do you intend to say as an author? Know this before you start to write.

Two main forces struggle against each other in a story: the **protagonist** and the **antagonist**.

Sooner or later (the sooner the better), the **protagonist** starts the conflict. How do you recognize the protagonist? He starts the conflict. The aggressor is always the protagonist.

Why do readers demand conflict in stories? Because no character will expose himself without it. No character can show his inner turmoil, contradiction, vacillation, self-doubt, hate, love without *attacking* or *defending* himself.

Every protagonist forces the conflict through the story. He always knows what he wants. Iago in *Othello* wants revenge. Whatever the protagonist wants, he must want it so badly that he will destroy or be destroyed in the attempt to get it. But no real protagonist will start a conflict because of a whim. *Necessity drives him*. Only a great, compulsive, uncontrollable drive can carry the protagonist through the end of the story.

The **antagonist** is the other force, besides the protagonist, who sparks the conflict. He is willing to fight, struggle, connive, undermine, lie, to divert the attention of the protagonist from his goal. Neither the protagonist or antagonist can exist without the other. The protagonist is always against the antagonist. This is the essence, the bone structure of all writing.

The combatants should be evenly matched. If there is no unbreakable bond between the two main forces, they are likely to walk out on each other. The unbreakable bond is created by great love, great hate, hurt ego, revenge, or any other emotion you can think of, but it must be really great. The rest of the characters in the story will side with one or the other of the combatants.

Conflict is the heart of any story. If conflict doesn't grow in intensity, the story will drag. Every action creates a counter action. These should form a chain reaction, which goes on interminably in an ascending scale until the climax. All conflict in stories is *for* or *against* the status quo. Any small squabble, insult, little or big war started *for* or *against* the status quo.

Any story is supposed to be a mirror of life. Struggle is the essence of life. Story will be about struggle. Any story must concern itself with the problems of humankind: love, hate, avarice, suspicion, ambition, or any of the myriad fears that beset us mortals.

Every human being fights constantly for his or her superiority. The importance of being important is the equivalent of self-preservation.

Every story should be built on slowly rising conflict, with all the transitions in place.

Character Questionnaire

1. What is your story's **premise**? Subject - verb - object. Character - conflict - resolution. EX: "Unswerving integrity delivers from disgrace."
2. What is your character's **goal**? What does he want, more than anything?
3. What is your protagonist's **compulsive, 100% trait**? (see p. 6)
4. What is your character **insecure** about? All characters want self-preservation and security.
5. **Why** is the character insecure about this condition? How did he or she develop that insecurity about the condition?
6. **How** did the character develop the condition about which he is insecure? What is this injury for which the character has a compulsive drive to escape? Backstory here. Provide a specific event or series of events that explain how he developed the condition. Those events caused a chain of reaction/action/reaction. Tell the tale.

Detail the three dimensions of your character:

Physiology (physical make-up), external appearance and health:

Sociology (environment):

Psychology:

7. What is the **crisis** that upsets the status quo? How does it affect the protagonist? Why is the protagonist **dissatisfied**?

8. What is the **dire necessity** that spurs the protagonist to action and keeps him relentless to reach his goal? This is something that threatens his special insecurity.

9. How does **hesitation** to take action threaten to worsen the protagonist's situation?

10. What **decision** will he make or **action** will he take to change things? This is his **point of attack**, the decision or action that starts the conflict.

11. Is the protagonist fighting *for* or *against* the status quo? Does he want to keep things the way they are, or change them because they've become intolerable?

12. Who is your **antagonist**? He must be diametrically and militantly opposed to the protagonist.

13. **Why** does the antagonist oppose the protagonist and his goal? What is the antagonist's motivation?

14. What is the point of 1) **contradiction** and 2) **conflict** between them?

15. What is the **unbreakable bond** between the protagonist and antagonist? What is so much at stake that they can't leave each other? Multiple reasons are good.

16. What is the **wrong step** the protagonist makes that **starts the crisis**?

17. How does this decision **create another problem**?

18. What does the protagonist do to **rectify** this new problem?

19. How does this response create another, **worse, problem**?

20. How does the final crisis, conflict, and resolution **prove your premise**?