

HOW TO BUILD A STORY

THE 7-STORY MAXIMS

At the heart of every story lies a dilemma. It is not a question of whether or not our protagonist has a dilemma, but rather how effectively it has been explored. By exploring our protagonist's dilemma, we are led to the most dynamic version of our story. In fact, the dilemma is the source of our story, and it is from this place that all tension and conflict arises. Exploring the dilemma helps distill our prose to its clearest meaning. It sheds light on what does not belong, those random digressions that are not germane to the central conflict and that may obfuscate its meaning. It offers clues to what still needs to be rewritten and leads us to the most effective order of events.

Story Maxim #1: The purpose of story is to reveal a transformation.

By definition, a dilemma cannot be figured out. In order to connect to it, we must become invested in our characters. Sometimes there can be a tendency to hold so tightly to our idea of our characters that we choke them into submission, and are left with two-dimensional versions of what they could have been. By inquiring into the dilemma, we are free to explore our characters in surprising ways, and our story can move inexorably to a climax that reveals a transformation.

WHAT IS A DILEMMA?

A dilemma is a problem that cannot be solved without creating another problem. Many writing books talk about the dramatic problem, the *thing* that the protagonist is attempting to solve or overcome through the story. However, after years of working with writers, I have discovered that the notion of a dramatic problem actually limits the writer's understanding of his story. When we approach our

story as if our protagonist is struggling with a problem, we tend to try to figure out a way to fix it, which can short-circuit our work, because underlying our protagonist's "apparent" problem is a dilemma. By inquiring into the dilemma, we begin to see our story from a wider perspective.

Story Maxim #2: Problems are *solved*, while dilemmas are *resolved* through a shift in perception.

It is unlikely that many writers are even conscious of their story's dilemma. In fact, I have talked to many successful writers who only seem to have a vague sense of it. They are aware of the mechanics – that each scene must contain tension, and that this tension should build through the story to its eventual climax. However, this alone is not always enough to create a story that feels thoroughly satisfying – even for the author. There can be that nagging feeling that something has been left unsaid, yet they are not able to articulate it. There is often great value in becoming clear on the dilemma because it can expose aspects of our characters that lead to more dynamic situations in our work.

PLOT VERSUS THEME

The problems that our protagonist encounters address our story's plot, but when we explore these problems as a whole we begin to notice underlying patterns that reveal the dilemma, and this relates to our theme. Typically, we tend to see our situations as problems. We may believe that if only we got the promotion our life would be better, or that if we lost weight, or quit smoking, or got a girlfriend, or moved out of our parent's basement, then everything would be just fine. However, underlying these apparent problems lie a deeper reason for why we have not accomplished our goal. The fact is that the meaning we attach to our desire actually prevents us from achieving our goal. It is not that our desire is bad or wrong, it is that the meaning we attach to it assures its lack of success.

WHERE DID OUR STORY COME FROM?

Perhaps our story began as a premise, a character, or a single idea, but underlying these impulses was a subconscious quest for resolution. The creative impulse seeks to make order from chaos, to contextualize a series of events with the intention of making new meaning from them. As storytellers, we are drawn to unresolved situations: Will Jimmy Stewart leave Bedford Falls? Will Dorothy's dreams come true somewhere over the rainbow? Will Harry Potter triumph over Lord Voldemort?

These questions appear to present a problem but they are actually providing a context through which we can explore a resolution to a dilemma. If Jimmy Stewart did leave Bedford Falls at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*, we would be disappointed because he would not have wrestled with his dilemma and learned that his life is already wonderful. Similarly, if Dorothy's dreams did come true somewhere over the rainbow, we would miss the point, and if Harry Potter simply destroyed Lord Voldemort and that was the end of it, there would be no context for the theme—which is that good and evil must coexist.

Story Maxim #3: The desire to write is connected to the desire to resolve something we seek to understand. By noticing the central dilemma in our story, we will see where it exists in our life. By exploring its resolution in our life, we will find its resolution in our story.

Here are some examples of dilemmas:

- I want intimacy, but I do not want to reveal myself.
- I want to be successful, but I do not want to overshadow my father.
- I want to move on from my mother's death, but I do not want to say goodbye to her.
- I want to know what happens when I die, so that I will know how to live.

- I want to have faith, but I do not trust God.
- I want to be forgiven, but I do not want to confess.
- I want love, but I don't want to commit.
- I want to control my thoughts, so that I can have peace.
- I want to be true to myself, but I do not want to disappoint anybody.

Notice how dilemmas are visceral. They engage the imagination and demand an emotional experience.

HOW DO WE IDENTIFY THE DILEMMA IN OUR STORY?

There are two ingredients to a dilemma:

1. A powerful desire.
2. A false belief.

DESIRE: OUR PROTAGONIST'S GOAL

If we believe that love will make us complete, we might set out on a search for love and misinterpret each relationship that does not resemble completeness as an absence of love. Or we might seek success because we believe it will bring us joy, and with each achievement we find ourselves despairing at the elusiveness of joy. Obviously there is nothing wrong with our characters wanting love, or wanting to be successful, but when they make meaning out of these goals they actually create the impossibility of achieving them. By exploring the meaning that our protagonist makes out of her goal, we begin to get a glimpse of her dilemma.

Story Maxim #4: Our protagonist does not rid himself of his desire, but when he reframes the meaning he makes out of his desire, he is no longer ruled by it.

EVERY STORY BEGINS WITH A FALSE BELIEF

Since the purpose of story is to reveal a transformation, the arc of the story moves from a place of not knowing to knowing. Whether the story illustrates the journey from fear to love, ignorance to

wisdom, revenge to forgiveness, denial to acceptance, or some other journey, it is through the protagonist's false belief that our reader is led to a new understanding. It is not that our protagonist's belief is incorrect; it is just not the whole story. The protagonist's false belief is going to be tested through the story, and this will lead him to a new understanding. For example, in John Grisham's *The Firm*, the protagonist, Mitch McDeere, believes that money will solve his problems. He takes a well-paying job with a firm that he knows nothing about, and soon discovers that he is working for the mob and can never get out. It is true that money can solve some of his problems, but until he is willing to lose everything, he is a hostage to this false belief.

We tend to focus on our immediate problem rather than on its underlying cause. Let's say that our protagonist Bill has a few drinks at the bar, and while driving home he gets a DUI. At this point, he most assuredly has a problem, but underlying his problem may be a dilemma. Perhaps Bill is an alcoholic and wants to get sober but believes that he cannot survive the anxiety of sobriety. Although the problem may be the DUI and its attendant inconveniences, underlying this problem is the false belief that he cannot survive as a sober person. By noticing our character's desire coupled with his false belief, we begin to see the dilemma.

Story Maxim #5: By exploring the tension that drives any scene in our story, and delving into the internal struggle between the character's desire and the meaning she attaches to her desire, we are led to the dilemma.

EXAMPLES OF DILEMMAS FROM CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

Fight Club: The unnamed protagonist craves a sense of identity and belonging. However, he believes that he is incapable of making decisions for himself. The dilemma is resolved when he destroys his false self and takes responsibility for his life.

Eat, Pray, Love: The author and protagonist, Elizabeth Gilbert, seeks to enjoy the pleasures of the world while devoting herself to God. The dilemma is resolved when she reframes her relationship to “balance” by trusting her heart.

The English Patient: The protagonist, Count Laszlo de Almasy, wants to reveal himself, but believes that intimacy leads to suffering for himself and others. The dilemma is resolved when he reveals his story to Caravaggio, which leads to understanding and forgiveness.

ALL OF OUR CHARACTERS CONSTELLATE AROUND THE DILEMMA

Since story is the exploration of a theme, and theme is revealed through characters in conflict, every character in our story has a relationship to the dilemma. This does not mean that all of our characters are struggling with the dilemma in the same way, but that the dilemma is universal and it keeps our story anchored to its theme.

Story Maxim #6: Identify your protagonist’s goal, and you will discover that all of your characters share this goal.

In *Fight Club*, the hero and Tyler Durden both want a sense of identity. In *The English Patient*, the characters all crave intimacy, and in *Eat, Pray Love*, all of the characters have a different relationship to “balance.” If our protagonist wants revenge because he believes that it will set him free, we may notice that all of our characters are seeking freedom through a variety of approaches. If our protagonist wants success because he believes that it will provide him with a sense of validation, we may notice that all of our characters are seeking validation in different ways.

Story Maxim #7: The resolution to the protagonist’s dilemma involves the shedding of her old identity.

Though liberating, transformation can be bittersweet, because there is always a cost attached. Something must be lost. Becoming an adult

means the death of our youth. Falling in love means the death of singlehood. Having a child may herald the death of irresponsibility.

CHARACTER AND DILEMMA

The dilemma must be explored through character. If the characters' dilemma is not shown through action and conflict, it will have little effect on the reader. Regardless of race, religion, social class, or geography, every human being can relate to love, hate, pride, fear, trust, rage, compassion, impatience, self-pity, lust, faith, betrayal, and all other primal experiences.

A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of inquiring into the dilemma is to gain a wider perspective on our story. I was working with a writer whose protagonist wanted desperately to protect the family legacy and was threatened by her daughter falling in love with a man of a different race. Although the writer's story was rich with conflict, she was unable to see how to resolve the mother's bitterness with her imagined ending of the mother accepting her daughter and future husband. How on earth could she bridge this intractable problem? The solution lay in inquiring into the nature of family legacy as opposed to her idea of it. The dilemma resolved itself when the mother reframed her relationship to her family's legacy and discovered that it was not about a bloodline, but about unconditional love.

The reason a well-told story is so compelling is because the reader understands implicitly that the protagonist is struggling with an unsolvable problem. As authors it is unlikely that we fully comprehend the dilemma in all of its manifestations, though we almost certainly have a *sense* of it. Exploring the dilemma is a process that continues in the rewrite. The same way that a photographer is not fully conscious of why she snaps the picture, there is a similar experience for writers. We are attempting to capture something on the page, a fleeting thought, an experience that we can not quite articulate, an idea that we do not quite understand, and by placing

these moments in the context of a story, these experiences can be transmitted to our reader as something larger than we are, something beyond our limited understanding.