

# Checklist focuses on CHARACTER, CONFLICT

These questions will make sure you've accomplished an ironic, but vital, task—thwarting desire

By Gregory Martin



**Y**our character wants something badly. Your reader wants your character to get what he wants. Your job is to disappoint both of them. Ironic? Sure. Narratives are driven by desire: 1) the character's desire, 2) the reader's desire that the character succeeds, or at least, the reader's desire to see what happens to all this yearning, and 3) the author's desire to thwart both the character and the reader.

It's this thwarting of desire that beginning writers need to cultivate. It doesn't

come naturally. Far too often, writers are unwilling to let their characters make mistakes and get themselves into trouble that has both cost and consequence for which the story holds them accountable. In stories with this kind of trouble, the protagonists are too passive, too coddled by their author, to make the kind of graceless mistakes born of the yearning and desperation that create good fiction.

You, the writer, can be as poised as you want, act with aplomb, reserve, tact, polish. But your characters can't. Your task is to put your characters in true dilemmas, where they make hard choices, and don't always make good decisions. These situations, and these choices, ought to be open

to the reader's moral imagination, allowing the reader to participate in the life of the story—so that the reader has to ask: *What would I do?*

The following checklist is a craft guide to characterization and conflict. It's not a crutch or simple remedy. It's asking a lot of you and your story. It should make you feel slightly despairing. It's designed to help your draft become more of a story, less a rough assemblage of unsuspenseful, incoherent narrative-ish moments.

The checklist is also a form of triage. It helps you to focus on necessary elements, without which your draft is not a story. The movement from an early draft to a middle draft is predicated entirely on

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**AS A VETERAN** freelance book editor, I have writers send me their books for a "final" look and "maybe a few corrections." They think the works are ready for publication. Guess what? They're not. Well, maybe a few mutants have sent truly finished novels, but it's rare.

In any case, the following list will help you reach that utopian state of finished.

**1 The hook doesn't hook.** Check for forgettable lan-

guage, disembodied voices, info dumps, plot but no character, a slew of to-be verbs, no movement, no raised questions, no scene structure. **2 Absent or unclear scene goals and scene structure.** Goal-opposition = conflict = suspense. Check *every* scene. Prune rambling roses.

**3 Two-dimensional protagonists.** Cardboard cutouts. Stereotypes. They speak, they act, they see. That's all. Give your characters significant pasts that intrude into the

plot with a wound needing healing, a psychological need that must be satisfied.

**4 Flat, middle-class news-commentator voice.** Give your characters original language. Dress 'em up or dress 'em down but give 'em style, including an attitude, a burning passion, and rich metaphorical language befitting who they are.

**5 Plot highs and plot lows.** A flat line is you know what. Put big scenes on steroids. Raise the stakes, and then

draw out the punishment or prolong the joy. Plot lows mean burrowing into characterization to show character weaknesses, vulnerabilities, fears, needs, and traumatic past events; then help them rise from the ashes into their strengths, powers, and plans to move forward.

**6 Omission of subtext.** Subtext is what is happening beneath the surface. Subtext may be the "hidden agenda" of the viewpoint character, revealed through thoughts.

focusing on major flaws. Your job is to stop the bleeding where the bleeding is most profuse. Don't worry about hangnails. Too many beginning writers think that tinkering around with syntax and punctuation constitutes revision. Not at the early stages it doesn't. Steven Koch, in his great book *The Modern Library Writer's Workshop*, says, "Don't polish a mess."

Some students find applying a rubric like this "constraining"; they feel less intuitive and spontaneous. It's *supposed* to feel constraining. Form is a container, a constrictor; it gives shape to what was amorphous and lacking. You need it because your intuition and spontaneity are not enough to render meaning to readers.

**1 What is your character's ground situation?** The ground situation, according to John Barth, is the unstable but static (tense but unchanging) situation prior to whatever comes along and kicks the story into gear.

**2 What does your character want?**

**3 Why? What are your characters' motivations?** Why do they want what they want? Often this is related in some meaningful way to the answer to question No. 4.

**4 What is your character's problem—rooted not in the situation but in the character?** Put another way: What is

your character's existential dilemma? Dumbo's problem is not his big ears. His problem is how he feels about his ears.

**5 What's in the way of your character getting what he or she wants?**

**6 What happens to make this static situation dynamic?** I sometimes call this the story's trigger. *Things were like this and this, and then one day ... a wig turned up in the garbage ... a blind man came to spend the night.*

**7 How does this trigger change the nature of the ground situation?** How does this trigger present new obstacles that weren't there before?

**8 Are these obstacles formidable?** How? (Each one needs to be formidable.)

**9 Is there complication or rising action?** Are these obstacles of a different kind? (They can't just be, in essence, the same obstacle but in a sequence.)

**10 How is the story a record of choices?** Are these choices true dilemmas, open to the reader's moral imagination?

**11 Describe your character's reversal.** In order for your story to be a story, your character must, in some way, change. No one grabs your collar and says, "You've got to listen to what happened to me.

After this happened, I was the same as I was before." That's not a story.

**12 How is this reversal both related to a) action—to something that happens in the story and b) a choice the character made, and how is it related to some kind of c) recognition on her part?**

**13 Do your characters get what they want?** They shouldn't, at least not in some meaningful way.

Are these questions hard to answer without first having a draft finished—without a beginning, middle and ending? Yes, so write your draft first. How do you write something that has a beginning, middle and end, without first knowing all the subtle, profound complexities? Here's how. Write down the basic sequence of events. *This happened. And then this happened. And then this happened. And then this happened.* Until you're done.

Then, apply the checklist. Revise accordingly. Then, go back and make it subtle and profound.

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Subtext may involve nature—storms, snarling dogs, flesh-eating bacteria, a collapsing bridge—foreshadowed and peripheral to the surface action or goals.

Sometimes subtext offers more tension and conflict than the external plot. Subtext can be the woman humming a song in the shower while lathering herself with Dove when she feels air movement. She thinks nothing of it, but readers know a psycho with a knife has just entered the bathroom.

**7 A humdrum plot.** How

can you render your story to be different from all others? Your first drafts are crappy. How do I know? Anne Lamott said so. Problem is, your "finished" work may be full of it, too. Consider each scene and ask *What if?* Keep inhaling helium until you squeak out truly original scenes, characters and outcomes. Revise. Make Mom proud. You'll sell the next version, or the next.

**8 Underdeveloped narration, i.e., telling.** No, "show, don't tell" is not the end-all and be-all. You must tell well,

and that means opening up your descriptions of characters and setting and using riff-writing—choose a setting, for instance, and let your imagination run wild, like a jazz player blowing his horn. Well-written narration must be *necessary* (for reader understanding), *relevant* (to the immediate action), *natural* (woven in, through the point-of-view character (not showing the writer's hand), and *proportionate* (short, medium or long, depending upon the place and pace of your passage).

**9 Significant stakes.** Make potential losses huge in consequences, whether it means threat of death or dismemberment, or threat of shame or dishonor. Tuck lower-stakes scenes into higher-stakes scenes or summarize them. Use a suspense meter: 1-5, one being of lowest interest, and rate each page.

Now, you're truly *finished*.

### Elizabeth Lyon

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