



Getting Into Character: Obstacles

If your story isn't better after implementing the concepts of this worksheet, I'll eat my hat. (This hat is, of course, made of dark chocolate dusted with sea salt).

In this worksheet, we're going to look at the obstacles that are keeping your character from getting what they want: in the book as a whole, and in individual scenes. This is *the* number one issue I see in the manuscripts I work on: Even if the writer has nailed down their Character Keys (Desperate Desire, Misbelief, Longing, Purpose), they're not quite sure how to go about writing compelling chapters that keep the pot simmering. What results is passive characters with no agency, unclear motives, and a plot that's as rambling as drunken walk through Paris at night.

In contrast, many writers who have no experience of getting in another's skin in such an intentional way might find themselves imposing a plot on a character and treating them like their own personal puppet.

Whether you consider yourself a character-based writer or plot-focused scribe, the vast majority of struggles I see in the manuscripts I edit is a distinct lack of emotionally resonant and clear obstacles. Another way of looking at this is "causality"—cause and effect. In many books, I see effects with no cause. Things happen, but we're not sure why. Or nothing happens but a lot of wistful soul-searching by your protagonist.

Conflict is the root of all drama!!!! When you want something and a big baddie or nature or fate keeps you from getting it? DRAMA! And drama is what all stories—comedies or tragedies—are about.

Part One: Desire Keys // "What's my motivation?"

Before you can get clear on obstacles, you have to be clear on desire. **You have to want something in order to fight to get it or keep someone from taking it from you.**

If conflict is the root of all drama, *desire* is the root of all conflict. Don't put the cart before the horse. You must identify what your character's Desperate Desire is before you can get anything off the ground. Thing is, a lot of writers know that and their book is still a mess. Why? Because they're making what would be a rookie mistake in the theatre: they're playing the character's macro Desperate Desire (Frodo wants to get rid of the ring) instead of their *micro* desire in that scene (Frodo wants to sleep after a long day of walking, only it's not safe to stop, so he has to stay awake). In the theatre, a micro desire is called an objective. What the what?

*** Please refer to my Unlock Your Novel workbook and lecture to dive into Characters Keys and my secret weapon, objectives ("micro desires"). We put objectives at the beginning and end of every scene you write to create un-putdownable scenes. ***

:: If you went through Unlock already, then skip to page 5 of this worksheet. ::

A quick example to illustrate this, as well as my next point:

A big part of my background is in the theatre, as an actor and director. I have found that writers with a theatre background tend to have more ease creating plots that are deeply emotionally resonant and grounded in character desire more easily than other writers because they've been trained to actually *become* characters, to embody them. They live and breathe them every night in rehearsal or performing on the boards. Most of us American dramatic folk are trained in the Method, a somewhat bastardization of Stanislavsky's Method for actors. We are drilled to embody our characters, doing all kinds of crazy homework to go deeper into their psyche. In every scene we're asking:

- *What do they want?*
- *Why do they want it?*
- *Who or what is going to try to keep them from getting it?*

We identify our character's super objective first, then we go through each scene and identify their objective. I changed the lingo for our writerly purposes. "Super Objective" is now "Desperate Desire" and I've added "Longing" and "Misbelief," and Purpose—all of which I refer to as "Character Keys." Knowing your proto's Character Keys before you go into a scene makes your life a lot easier, but they're not what you focus on when you're in a scene or chapter. Instead, those Character Keys are operating in the back of your mind, kind of like how an app hums in the background when it's not in use.

Desperate Desire = Macro Desire The Proto Is Aware Of

Longing = The deepest level of desire for the proto – they are sometimes unaware of this

Misbelief = The untrue thing / story the proto believes about themselves or the world that runs them and causes problems for them (this is how they're self-sabotaging and their own worst enemy). Another way to look at this is that it's a wound.

Purpose = Why your character was put on this planet. Their mission in life.

Objective = Micro desires in a specific moment. (A good scene can have many objectives—see below).

For every scene we play the objective. That is ALL we are concerned with. Why? Because nobody plays super objectives (Desperate Desire) in real life, whether they are consciously aware of them or not. Here's an imaginary example, which I share in the Unlock Workbook:

Analysis of an Activity (classic Stanislavsky method homework, tweaked for our purposes):

An actor is standing in an audition line.

Character Keys (for the whole book – these do not change):

Desperate Desire: Fame. He wants the EGOT situation like nobody's business. (This will only get you so far, writer. You want to go even deeper. WHY does he want fame? The answer to that question is his true super-objective).

Longing: To feel like his life on this planet matters. To feel like he made a mark. *Wait for it....* To feel like HE'S NOT THROWING AWAY HIS SHOT.

Misbelief: He's doesn't have what it takes to achieve his dreams. (For one, his terrible memory is going to keep him from ever "making it." What kind of an actor can't memorize well?!)

Purpose: To feel like his life on this planet matters, and to make his mark on it.

The Scene:

Action: Waiting in an audition line. He's going to use this time to make sure he's memorized his lines and has his song prepared. Preparing mentally to audition. He needs to rock the hell out of *My Shot*. Not texting with his friends or taking selfies, like these other rookie actors he's in line with.

OBJECTIVE he's going into the scene with: He's getting this part he's auditioning for. He's dying to play Hamilton and nothing is going to keep him from that role, especially his terrible memory.

OBSTACLE: Oh no! The stage manager says the director will only see three more actors.

OBJECTIVE: He's getting in front of that director come hell or high water or Barbara Streisand herself.

ACTION: Cutting in line so he can get through the door. He lies. He says the director is his third cousin. He says the director personally said to come to this audition. He does whatever he has to do to get backstage. They let him through, but probably only because the stage manager thinks he's cute.

ACTION: Slipping the stage manager some cash so he can get a sense of why the director rejected the actors before him. He learns something horrifying...

OBSTACLE: The director is suddenly asking people to do a Shakespearean monologue. WTF?! He can't remember his *Hamlet* and certainly not his *Romeo*. The stage manager says the director likes people who takes risks. Hmmm...

ACTION: Our actor can't remember his *Romeo* ("*but soft, what light through yonder window breaks...something something, arise fair maiden and...oh god*"), but he totally remembers Radiohead's *Talk Show Host*, which is the opening of Baz Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet*, which means it's technically Shakespeare, like in an alternate universe, so he decides to go for it.

OBJECTIVE: Get the director to fall in love with his unusual interpretation of the words "Shakespearean monologue."

ACTION: Our actor stands on the edge of the stage and is all, "I'll be doing *Romeo and Juliet*, Act One, *Romeo and Benvolio*" and launches into his best Thom Yorke meets Romeo Montague. And, because it's Hamilton, he *raps it*. Result? Our actor gets the motherloving part based on the kind of cleverness Alexander Hamilton himself would have high-fived him for.

And....**SCENE**.

See how in playing the objective, he's also moving the Desperate Desire forward?

Check it out: Being discovered by an important director and getting the lead as Hamilton on Broadway will allow him to be discovered by future directors who see him in the performances which will lead to more work and eventually leads to becoming a famous actor in movies or the next fancy Netflix drama. Maybe Lin Manuel himself will use him for something! But in order to get his Unconscious Need (what, as Jerry Maguire might say, *truly* completes him), our actor is going to have to realize that fame ain't all it's cracked up to be, and what will happen is he'll find his desire isn't to be famous at all, but to leave a mark on the world by making it a better place, and, because our story is kickass and dramatic and needs tissues, he REALLY leaves his mark in a way he never could have predicted which is that his failed memory leads to a really embarrassing moment which leads to him overcoming his misbelief by turning it into self-development guru gold: how to overcome your own personal obstacles and still thrive. He's an inspiration to millions, unexpectedly famous but NOT for his acting, and famous in a way that changes lives. This will ultimately be more emotionally resonant and powerful than an EGOT. He might be a crappy actor, but he's a great motivational speaker.

Exercise: Go back through and see for yourself if only tried to play the Desperate Desire? Would he be able to pivot as new info came forward if all he's thinking about is being famous someday in the future...or if you were pulling the puppet strings and having him play his Unconscious Need...but, consciously? How do you play "I want to make a mark on the world?" That's way harder than, "I want this motherloving part."

MIC DROP.

So, remember, play the objective!

Part Two: Obstacle Hunt

You're a smart writer, so I'm sure you noticed how we got from *an actor is standing in a line to audition* to perhaps the greatest cover of Radiohead the world has ever known that leads to landing a lead on Broadway.

But what gave this scene focus and energy, with high stakes and drama?

The OBSTACLES that were getting in the way of our actor having a shot at the big time. Did you notice how many times his objective had to shift, getting more and more micro? Sure, he wanted the part, but he had to shift his objective a little bit each time in order to stay in play. Simply wanting the part isn't something you can play. Cutting in line to get through a door that will lead you closer to the part *is*. Notice how those obstacles ratcheted up an already tense scene. Notice how our protagonist got closer in his arc to his ultimate goal (making his mark on the world, not throwing away his shot). And notice how clear it was for us, as the readers, what he wanted, which made it easy for us to root and fear for him. We couldn't stop turning pages if you pointed a gun at us, not until we knew whether he'd get the part or not. Plus, we're worried about his bad memory, and we know how badly he wants this, and what the odds are.

We love watching people have some skin in the game who are going for something they want. Just look at *American Ninja Warrior*.

In the theatre we always say "Acting is reacting." Same for books. Your protagonist needs to react with agency to whatever is being thrown their way.

"The Given Circumstances": In the theatre, we first look at the given circumstances in a scene and build on that to create something compelling and full of drama and life. So, your book probably already has "given circumstances." For example, if your book takes place on a spaceship, then some given circumstances will be that they need a space suit to survive outside the ship, they need to ration supplies, they will have a lot of technology and rules. You start there and build off of that. You're the author, so you get to make the given circumstances, but the further you get into a book, the more is in place. The book as a whole will have given circumstances, as will each scene. This is a useful term because it reminds you to comb your own work for anything you're missing that could become a potential obstacle. What's already on the table, and how can you use it?

Part Three: The Anatomy of the Objective in Your WIP

- First, look at the opposites of your character's Desperate Desire to see if there are possible obstacles embedded in there (example: she wants love, but she's overweight)

and can't seem to attract the guy she wants – this could be true or imagined, on her part)

- This is also related to Misbelief. Is there a way you can trigger their Misbelief in the scene?
- Next, look at all the things that could prevent your character from getting what she wants. (Example: A gold medal in the Olympics – break her leg! Have her coach quit! Have her be late to the qualifying round!)
- What are your protagonist's inner conflicts? In general, yes, and specifically in the various scenes you're working on. This could be moral dilemmas, misbeliefs about herself, self-doubt, fear, etc. (Our actor needs to get through that door and he might feel bad about lying to cut ahead of other guys...but he's gonna do it anyway. This might bite him in the ass later in the story.)
- What in their backstory provides obstacles for the current story? (Bad parents, former addiction, etc)
- Outer conflict: What or who is against your character? (Poverty, race, society, mental illness etc.)
- What does your character love most in the world? Now, take it away from them.
- What do they want most in the world? Now, make it damn near impossible to get.

Antagonist = A Great Stumbling Block and the Gift That Keeps on Giving

Who is against your character – and are they REALLY against her?

How is your proto antagonistic toward *themselves*?

What is your character's Misbelief? The story she tells herself that isn't true, but runs her? ("I'm not loveable.")

How does your character's Misbelief create obstacles for her? How is she her own worst enemy?

Compounding Obstacles

- List the obstacles facing your character in a given scene
- How do the obstacles build upon each other, rising both tension and stakes? (see the example of our actor above)
- What is the balance between inner obstacles (Misbelief etc.) and outer obstacles (antagonist, roadblocks, society, actual things or circumstances that occur in scene, etc.)

Scene Breakdown:

1. Identify the character's objective going into the scene (don't think about the Desperate Desire right now – if you've done your character work and you get in the skin of your character and stay with them, it will come through). It could be small – they have to use the restroom. Or huge: win a battle. In order for a scene to go, they must want something all the time.
2. Are they aware of possible obstacles? List them. (Romeo's all, *Damn, there are going to be so many Capulets that want to shiv us at this party. Fuck it, let's go anyway.*)
3. What is their Misbelief going into the scene? (Their Character Key, yes, and any micro misbeliefs related to the given circumstances of this scene).
4. Has anything happened just before the scene that will add to their mental state? Even if it happened "offstage," it's important to know this! Maybe they're out of breath because they missed a bus and are super distracted. Maybe they just got bad news from the doctor, or found \$20 on the ground.
5. What are the obstacles in the scene?
6. What are ways your character typically deals with these sorts of obstacles?
7. How will these particular obstacles challenge her?
8. What obstacles will she overcome?
9. Which ones will carry over into future scenes?
10. What will need to happen in order for her to overcome the obstacles in the book overall?
11. Have you embedded character growth in the scene—is she moving through her arc, or just treading water? (Obstacles should incite character growth, moving them to and away from desire, but always "to" because setbacks set up the climax).

Your Happy Ending

In order to keep readers turning pages, and to do yourself a solid as you draft your book, all scenes should be bookended with objectives. Beginning a scene with an objective gives you something to write – a starting point. *Ending* the scene with a * new * or revised objective gives you (and your proto) somewhere to go. It also allows invites curiosity – profluence – in the reader.

Profluence = From John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*

It's when you create good questions the reader will have at the end of a scene or chapter. They have to keep reading to see how something will play out. They can make predictions about what might happen and they want to keep turning pages to see how it's going to play out. Your chapters don't need to end on cliffhangers, but they do need to give us a sense of what's coming up next. You can do this subtly, but the chapter needs to have things that are unresolved that we want to see play out. It's highly enjoyable for a reader and intellectually (and maybe even physically!) stimulating.

Good Profluence:

- Something that needs to be accomplished
- A question
- Something that is uncertain – an outcome, a person's feelings toward the proto
- A clue in the mystery
- A moment of danger or tension that we need to turn the page to see play out
- A revelation
- A killing (literal or metaphorical)
- A surprise
- A reversal
- A new problem
- A ticking clock that is running out of time
- The arrival of someone or something unexpected
- A misunderstanding that the reader wants to see resolved
- Resolution of one problem, only to realize there is another
- A threat

And so on! The possibilities are endless, but you'll see in all these cases something is uncertain or unresolved and the reader *must* keep reading to get closure. Even if a chapter has answered questions, brought the lovers together, etc. there is at least a hint that all is not well yet. Even on the last page of the book you don't want *everything* tied up in a neat little bow. Messes keep the door to story open.