

High Concept Drills

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
HIGH CONCEPT IS MORE THAN THAT	6
HIGH CONCEPT EXAMPLES	6
BUT DO “PANTSERS” USE THIS?	6
YOU’RE IN LUCK	7
HOW?	8
WHY DRILLS?	8
WHAT YOU NEED TO DO NOW	10
THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF A HIGH CONCEPT IDEA	11
WHAT ARE THOSE FOUR ELEMENTS?	11
A FISH OUT OF WATER	13
HOW TO CATCH THAT FISH	13
BRAINSTORMING – NO JUDGING	14
SO THIS IS HOW YOU FIND FOW IDEAS	14
LET’S SEE HOW OTHERS DO THIS	15
DAY ONE DRILL	16
DAY TWO DRILL	20
DAY THREE DRILL	21
WANT MORE FOW?	22
A LOOMING CONFLICT	23
DON’T WORRY – YOU’LL LEARN HOW TO COME UP WITH LOOMING CONFLICTS	23
SETTINGS/CONDITIONS LOOMING CONFLICTS	24
HOW DO YOU FIND THE LOOMING CONFLICT?	26
BUT WHAT ARE ‘VALUES?’	27
HOW TO USE THE FORMULA	27
YOUR TURN NOW	29

DAY ONE DRILL	30
DAY TWO DRILL	31
DAY THREE DRILL	31
<u>A HOOK</u>	<u>32</u>
WHAT IS AN ASPIRATIONAL ELEMENT?	33
WHAT IS A FEARFUL ELEMENT?	34
WHAT IS AN ESCAPISM ELEMENT?	35
HOW DO YOU COME UP WITH HOOKS?	35
DAY ONE DRILL	35
DAY TWO DRILL	37
DAY THREE DRILL	38
<u>A UNIVERSAL THEME</u>	<u>39</u>
WHAT IS A UNIVERSAL THEME?	39
HOW DO YOU COME UP WITH A THEME?	40
LET'S TRY THAT OUT NOW	40
DAY ONE DRILL	40
DAY TWO DRILL	41
DAY THREE DRILL	41
<u>PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER</u>	<u>42</u>
YOU HAVE NOW LEARNED EVERY ELEMENT OF A HIGH CONCEPT IDEA	42
DO IT IN TWO WAVES	43
WRITE THE BOOK AND TRAIN YOUR IDEA MUSCLE	43
HOW TO GO FROM IDEA TO WRITING?	44
YOUR FINAL EXERCISES	44
DAY ONE DRILL	44
DAY TWO DRILL	44
DAY THREE AND FORWARD	44
<u>DISCLAIMER</u>	<u>45</u>
<u>RESOURCES</u>	<u>46</u>

MY LISTS 46

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 47

Introduction

A while ago, I read a short story that didn't grab me at all.

It wasn't because the characters were two-dimensional. They were fine. It wasn't because they lacked backstory, because it wasn't a must for that short story.

I just didn't care. Not for the characters or for the story.

Why not?

Because even though something happened that threatened the main character, that event took place later in the book.

There was no imminent danger from the start. No hint that there would be danger. Or any other reason for why I, the reader, should care for the characters.

Besides, it wouldn't have been a book I picked up on Amazon. Because with such a story, it's hard to write a compelling blurb or description.

That story needed High Concept.

High Concept is a term mostly used to describe a pitch for a Hollywood movie.

If the story can be expressed and show promise in a sentence or two, we have High Concept.

For those buyers of movie scripts, High Concept means clear and easy marketing.

But guess what? Even though we're not writing movie scripts, we **are** in business of selling our stories, and that is much easier to do when our ideas are High Concept.

High Concept Is More Than That

High Concept ideas mean exciting stories, which are more fun to write and more fun to read.

When your story idea is a High Concept idea, your readers will be more overbearing with spelling errors and grammar. And nothing is more annoying than getting a one-star review saying, “You wrote ‘sneak peak’ on page 28. I completely lost faith in you as a writer there.”

If the story grabs the reader, he’ll overlook minor errors.

And yes, when you have an idea you can share in one or three sentences, it is much easier to sell your book.

High Concept Examples

Better than explaining what High Concept is, how about some examples of successful movies based on High Concept ideas?

What if we could clone dinosaurs? (Jurassic Park)

Poisonous snakes terrorize a passenger jet (Snakes on a Plane)

A bus full of passengers is rigged with a bomb that will explode if the vehicle’s speed drops below 55 mph (Speed)

A 19th century Duke finds love in modern-day New York (Kate & Leopold)

High School students take on an invading communist army (Red Dawn)

A lawyer is forced to tell the truth for 24 hours (Liar Liar)

Lord of the Rings meets the Wars of the Roses (Game of Thrones)

But Do “Pantsers” Use This?

If you’re writing into the dark with only a character and a setting in mind, you might think that this is not for you.

You don't plan to start with a High Concept idea.

Fine, I completely understand.

But just like you train yourself to write by reading great stories, you can train your subconscious to come up with High Concept ideas by doing lots of drills.

We can use an analogy to make it clearer.

Let's say you own a wonderful bicycle, and for your next holiday you have decided to start from home, drive down the road and simply go where your mind and mood tell you to go that day.

You're going out on a great adventure, and you don't know which roads you'll travel or where you'll end.

You trust yourself to come up with that as you go.

But do you remember when you learned how to ride a bicycle? Back then it wasn't just jump up and go.

You had to make many, many attempts to use both feet at the same time, keep your balance and not fall off your bicycle.

All that training back then makes it possible for you today to just ride your bike into the wild blue yonder.

So it is with these fiction writing drills.

Train yourself with them now to improve your skills forever.

So to summarize:

- High Concept makes your story better.
- High Concept makes it easier to sell your book.

If only you knew how to come up with High Concept ideas, right?

You're in Luck

In this ebook, you'll learn:

- The **four ingredients** that makes coming up with High Concept ideas easy.
- How you can **increase the stakes and make it personal** (two wins).
- How to train your brain to come up with High Concept ideas on command.

How?

Don't worry...

No hypnosis (which is pleasant, by the way).

No drilling into your brain and uploading software.

No hocus pocus.

But lots of training drills.

Why Drills?

Why do you think they use drills in the military? Because they work.



And think about the famous words by Bruce Lee:

I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.

Personally, I would fear both men, but that's just me.

These drills are meant to work over three weeks.

You're going to work three days for each step and then a week for the final step of bringing it all together.

What You Need to Do Now

Get out a notebook and a pen.

You can use a computer, but I recommend the good old-fashioned manual way to write. It's good for you.

I know that there's some neuro-science that proves that writing with a pen or pencil on paper makes you more creative. But I don't consider proving this the most important issue right now.

In the end, it's up to you.

Do you want to use a notebook and a pen? Awesome! Let me give you a virtual hug.

If you prefer to write on your computer, fine with me.

The important thing is that you do the drills. So choose whatever works for you.

Get ready to start exercising the High Concept muscles.

Get up, fetch your tools, and then start reading the next chapter.

The Four Elements of a High Concept Idea

If all we know about a High Concept idea is that it can be expressed in one to three sentences, then how do we come up with one?

Award-winning author and writing trainer Jessica Brody has found that most High Concept ideas consist of four elements.

This chapter will give you an overview of the four elements. Future chapters will take them, one by one, and go into details as well as giving you exact exercises to do daily to get you in High Concept idea-shape.

What Are Those Four Elements?

They are:

- A fish out of water
- A looming conflict
- A hook
- A universal theme

Is the order important?

Not at all. I just picked the same order as Jessica. But you can start with a universal theme, then find the looming conflict, choose the fish out of water element, and finally the hook.

The order is not important.

That your idea fits into all four is.

But we'll take them one by one.

First, we'll simply train you on them completely free of any links to your stories or even genre.

Next, we'll add genre to the ideas to make them relevant for you.

We'll spend three days on each element.

And then one week combining the elements into a paragraph consisting of one, two or three sentences.

I'll start with the Fish Out of Water part. You can skip to the part you want.

A Fish Out of Water

You can have High Concept ideas without a Fish Out of Water (FOW) element...

But in so many ways, a FOW makes life and writing easier. And more interesting for the reader.

First of all, there's a built-in conflict. Our hero or heroine finds themselves in completely new surroundings or conditions.

The world as they knew it has ended.

Readers can't help but feeling sympathy for the poor character. They have so much to learn. They must adapt. They struggle.

Those are all good things in fiction.

How to Catch that Fish

When I think FOW, the first images that come to mind are *The Little Mermaid* and *Splash*.

Those two stories literally deal with a fish (or rather, a mermaid) removed from its element.

But obviously, there are millions of other ideas.

You're going to find some of those ideas by looking in existing best-selling and high-ranked movies.

And by brainstorming a character in a setting, and then changing the setting. First as any character and any setting, and next in your chosen genre. (If you don't have a chosen genre yet, then just use any character in any setting.)

I'll back with more details about the exercises a little later in this chapter.

Brainstorming – No Judging

Crazy ideas are welcome here.

Some will make you laugh – but then you might have the start of a comedy, right?

Some will make you go, “I would never write such a story.” And that’s fine. You might never. But we’re training our idea-finding muscles here, so it’s important to keep stretching and bending.

So **rule number one** for brainstorming: no judging.

Rule number two: set a timer.

It’s easy to get five ideas and then call it a day. But those might not be your best ideas.

When you have a timer ticking that tells you to go on, you’ll end up with more ideas and better ideas.

So This Is How You Find FOW Ideas

Step #1: Pick a character.

Step #2: Pick a setting or condition.

Step #3: Think the opposite (or at least very different) setting or condition.

Let me give you some examples.

#1

Character: fireman

Setting/condition: New York

Opposite setting/condition: tropical island with straw huts

#2

Character: American romance writer

Setting/condition: cozy apartment in peaceful neighborhood of Ukraine

Opposite setting/condition: wrongfully jailed as a spy

#3

Character: ballet dancer

Setting/condition: prima ballerina, touring the world with success

Opposite setting/condition: breaks a leg and gains 40 pounds

As you can see from those examples, sometimes it's the physical surroundings that change. Sometimes it's the world on a different level.

In all cases, the character has to deal with something completely different from what he knew.

Let's See How Others Do This

I'm going to use movies for the following example. Because movies are presented with a short blurb. Books aren't always.

We're going to check if those movies have a FOW element or not. And if they do, then what is the element?

If we look at *Alien* as an example. Its tagline is:

In space, no one can hear you scream.

Is there an FOW element here? Yes, and that's revealed by the words "in space." We might not have known if we didn't know the movie, of course.

So in order to do some more research, I check IMDB's page here:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078748/>

The blurb says: *After a space merchant vessel perceives an unknown transmission as a distress call, its landing on the source moon finds one of*

the crew attacked by a mysterious lifeform, and they soon realize that its life cycle has merely begun.

So now we know that a *space merchant vessel* is going down on a moon. A merchant vessel isn't geared to explore or to handle dangers.

We definitely have a FOW here.

Day One Drill

Your mission is to go through the ten highest rated movies on IMDB and find the FOW element (if possible) either in the tagline, the blurb, or the plot description.



IMDb Find Movies, TV shows, Celebrities and more... All

Movies, TV & Showtimes Celebs, Events & Photos News & Community Watchlist

FULL CAST AND CREW | TRIVIA | USER REVIEWS | IMDbPro | MORE | SHARE

The Shawshank Redemption (1994) ★ 9.3 /10 2,142,186 ☆ Rate This

R | 2h 22min | Drama | 14 October 1994 (USA)

TEAR CAN HOLD YOU PRISONER. HOPE CAN SET YOU FREE.

TIM ROBBINS MORGAN FREEMAN

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

2:11 | Trailer 4 VIDEOS | 113 IMAGES

Two imprisoned men bond over a number of years, finding solace and eventual redemption through acts of common decency.

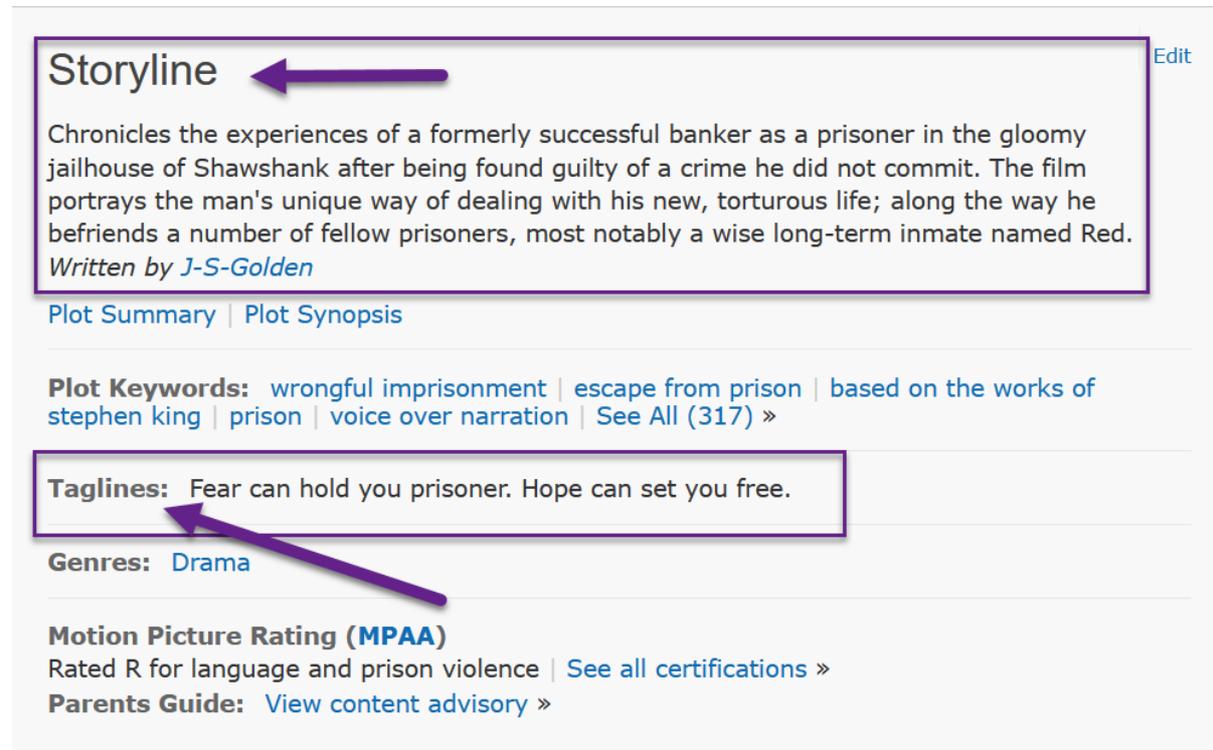
Director: [Frank Darabont](#)

Writers: [Stephen King](#) (short story "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption"), [Frank Darabont](#) (screenplay)

Stars: [Tim Robbins](#), [Morgan Freeman](#), [Bob Gunton](#) | [See full cast & crew](#) »

Blurb

And further down, after the cast, you'll find the storyline and the tagline.



The screenshot shows a movie page for 'The Shawshank Redemption'. A purple box highlights the 'Storyline' section, which contains a description of the film and the text 'Written by J-S-Golden'. A purple arrow points from the 'Storyline' header to the description. Another purple box highlights the 'Taglines' section, which contains the text 'Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.'. A purple arrow points from the 'Taglines' header to the tagline text. Below the taglines, the 'Genres' section is highlighted with a purple box, showing 'Drama'. The 'Motion Picture Rating (MPAA)' section is also visible, showing 'Rated R for language and prison violence | See all certifications »' and 'Parents Guide: View content advisory »'. The word 'Edit' is visible in the top right corner of the page.

Storyline ←

Chronicles the experiences of a formerly successful banker as a prisoner in the gloomy jailhouse of Shawshank after being found guilty of a crime he did not commit. The film portrays the man's unique way of dealing with his new, torturous life; along the way he befriends a number of fellow prisoners, most notably a wise long-term inmate named Red.
Written by J-S-Golden

[Plot Summary](#) | [Plot Synopsis](#)

Plot Keywords: [wrongful imprisonment](#) | [escape from prison](#) | [based on the works of stephen king](#) | [prison](#) | [voice over narration](#) | [See All \(317\)](#) »

Taglines: Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.

Genres: [Drama](#)

Motion Picture Rating (MPAA)
Rated R for language and prison violence | [See all certifications](#) »
Parents Guide: [View content advisory](#) »

Here are the top ten highest rated when I wrote this chapter (and if you want to see a bigger version, you can click here:

<https://cl.ly/de5dcba7c9ab>):

IMDb Charts

Top Rated Movies

Top 250 as rated by IMDb Users



Showing 250 Titles

Sort by:

Rank & Title	IMDb Rating	Your Rating	
 1. The Shawshank Redemption (1994)	★ 9.2	☆	
 2. The Godfather (1972)	★ 9.1	☆	
 3. The Godfather: Part II (1974)	★ 9.0	☆	
 4. The Dark Knight (2008)	★ 9.0	☆	
 5. 12 Angry Men (1957)	★ 8.9	☆	
 6. Schindler's List (1993)	★ 8.9	☆	
 7. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003)	★ 8.9	☆	
 8. Pulp Fiction (1994)	★ 8.9	☆	
 9. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)	★ 8.8	☆	
 10. Fight Club (1999)	★ 8.8	☆	

1: The Shawshank Redemption

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/>

2: The Godfather

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068646/>

3: The Godfather: Part II

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071562/>

4: The Dark Knight

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/>

5: 12 Angry Men

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050083/>

6: Schindler's List

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/>

7: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0167260/>

8: Pulp Fiction

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110912/>

9: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060196/>

10: Fight Club

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/>

Before you start, let's take an example. I'll pick the eleventh movie on the list:

11: The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/>

I'm going to quote both the blurb, the tagline, and the storyline from IMDB.

Blurb: A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron.

Tagline: Its power corrupts all who desire it. Only one has the will to resist it. A Fellowship of nine must destroy it.

Storyline: An ancient Ring thought lost for centuries has been found, and through a strange twist of fate has been given to a small Hobbit named Frodo. When Gandalf discovers the Ring is in fact the One Ring of the Dark Lord Sauron, Frodo must make an epic quest to the Cracks of Doom in order to destroy it. However, he does not go alone. He is joined by Gandalf, Legolas the elf, Gimli the Dwarf, Aragorn, Boromir, and his three Hobbit friends Merry, Pippin, and Samwise. Through mountains, snow, darkness, forests, rivers and plains, facing evil and danger at every corner the Fellowship of the Ring must go. Their quest to destroy the One Ring is the only hope for the end of the Dark Lord's reign.

Ladies and gentlemen. Do we have a FOW on our hands?

I think the blurb says it all. Yes, we do. A “meek” hobbit on a journey to save the world.

The tagline reveals it too, but only if we know the story.

And of course, the storyline makes it clear that we're taking a simple Hobbit (Frodo) and putting him in a completely new and dangerous world.

Now it's your turn.

Go through the first ten movies on the list and see if you can identify the FOW element either in the blurb, the tagline, or the storyline.

Day Two Drill

In today's exercise, you're going to brainstorm characters, settings/conditions, and the new settings/condition.

Here are my examples from earlier:

#1

Character: fireman

Setting/condition: New York

Opposite setting/condition: tropical island with straw huts

#2

Character: American romance writer

Setting/condition: cozy apartment in peaceful neighborhood of Ukraine

Opposite setting/condition: wrongfully jailed as a spy

#3

Character: ballet dancer

Setting/condition: prima ballerina, touring the world with success

Opposite setting/condition: breaks a leg and gains 40 pounds

Your Turn

1. Get a notebook and a pen.
2. Set a timer to 15 minutes.
3. Write down character, present or normal settings/conditions, new settings/conditions.

Day Three Drill

Today's exercise is very similar to yesterday's exercise.

Except today, you'll pick a genre and make sure your character would fit into that genre.

Your Turn

1. Get a notebook and a pen.
2. Set a timer to 15 minutes.
3. Write down character, present or normal settings/conditions, new settings/conditions.

Want More FOW?

Feel free to train your FOW-idea muscles every time you can.

What's stopping you from coming up with ideas in the shower, waiting for the bus, walking your dog, or vacuuming the carpet?

Nothing.

So brainstorm all you want in your head in those situations.

Tomorrow, we're going to look at the next element of a High Concept idea – the looming conflict.

A Looming Conflict

We human beings are funny, right?

We want our own lives to be easy, happy, and with no conflicts at all.

But when it comes to reading stories or watching movies, we want conflict.

We don't want to read about Jack and Jill having a perfect day, enjoying the sunny weather on the beach, playing ball in the waves.

No, we want to read about Jill fearing that Jack is having an affair and knowing that if he dumps her, then she'll be a single mother to the unborn child Jack hasn't heard about yet.

We want to find out how others deal with conflicts. Perhaps so we can learn to handle conflicts better ourselves.

The conflict makes us root for the character. We care about them and the story.

But what about looming?

Well, that means that we can add it to the blurb. We'll let our potential audience know in advance that there's going to be struggle, there's going to be tough conflicts, and they'll be here soon and not get solved until the end of the story.

This conflict shouldn't come out of the blue as a surprise. It should be there, looming in the distance.

Don't Worry – You'll Learn How to Come Up with Looming Conflicts

Sometimes you don't even have to mention the looming conflict.

When you have a bunch of happy teens on a beach in the evening, and the movie poster features a huge shark with an open mouth,

showing its jaws with teeth sharper than awls, then we know the happiness won't last.

Or like Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) says it in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*: “Yeah. ‘Ooh, ah,’ that's how it always starts. But then later there's running and screaming.”

The looming conflict can come from the setting, the conditions, like in *Jaws* and *Jurassic Park*. Or it can come from the character itself and their values. We'll see about that in a moment.

Settings/Conditions Looming Conflicts

You place a number of teenagers on a beach, you add a huge shark to the water next to the beach, and wham! Looming conflict.

You place a few adults, untrained with handling wild animals, and a couple of kids in a park filled with dinosaurs. Looming conflict.

But what about the FOW elements we came up with before?

Let's see if they work, too.

I made three examples:

#1

Character: fireman

Setting/condition: New York

Opposite setting/condition: tropical island with straw huts

Is there anything here that could mean a looming conflict?

Yes, what if a huge fire breaks loose and threatens to burn down all the straw huts and kill everybody on the island? We have only one fireman and none of the tools he had access to in New York.

#2

Character: American romance writer

Setting/condition: cozy apartment in peaceful neighborhood of Ukraine

Opposite setting/condition: wrongfully jailed as a spy

I see lots of looming conflicts here.

How about the ultimate? Our romance writer is sentenced to death.

#3

Character: ballet dancer

Setting/condition: prima ballerina, touring the world with success

Opposite setting/condition: breaks a leg and gains 40 pounds

Oh... a looming conflict here? Hm... I don't see any obvious ones. But what if our ballet dancer had a contract and that she has to make a huge performance on International TV two months later, or she'll be sued for breaking the contract and risk losing everything she has, including her childhood home where her disabled sister lives with their parents?

And How About IMDB #11?

If I for a moment pretend that I haven't read the books or watched the movie, let's take a look at the FOW element again.

Character: a meek Hobbit

Setting/condition: The Shire – quiet place

Opposite setting/condition: dark and evil outside world

Looming conflict? What's going on in the outside world? Will there be monsters?

That's not enough. We need a conflict that lasts until the end. How about an evil guy who wants to destroy the Middle-earth?

Here's the blurb again:

Blurb: A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron.

As you can see, the looming conflict is included in the blurb.

How Do You Find the Looming Conflict?

You can go through your characters and settings, like I just did.

And remember two things:

- A looming conflict doesn't come out of the blue. It's there from the start, hovering on the horizon.
- A looming conflict spans the entire length of the story. It isn't solved until the very end.

If you can spot the looming conflict from your FOW element, great.

Otherwise, I have an alternative method that works wonders.

You take your character, find their core value, add a dilemma and get a looming conflict.

Character + Core Value + Dilemma = Conflict

How about an example?

24. I love 24.

In the first season, it quickly becomes clear that Jack Bauer's core value is that nothing is more important than family and his country.

What kind of dilemma could we come up with for Jack?

How about that he must choose between family and country?

If you've seen the series, you know that's what happens. His daughter is kidnapped, and if he doesn't kill the presidential candidate, the kidnapers will kill his daughter.

The tagline says, “He's got one day to save his family and protect his country. The clock is ticking.”

That completely nails it. Except that the tagline didn't indicate that if he tries to save his family, he cannot protect the country. And if he protects the country, he cannot save his family.

But What Are ‘Values?’

Values are issues that are important to us.

It can be important to us that we be honest. Honesty is a value.

It can be important to us that we be healthy. Health is a value.

We human beings – and therefore our characters – can have many values.

We can appreciate values like honesty, health, security, confidence, and justice.

The core value is the most important for us. It's the one about which we can say that “nothing is more important than ...”

Our values, especially the core value, guide our behaviors and reactions.

We will then use this core value to come up with a dilemma.

You can find a great list of 200 values here:

<https://scottjeffrey.com/core-values-list/>

The core value you decide on spans the entire length of the story and even further, in most cases, if you're writing a series.

Unless your character learns something that means that he'll change his core value, then it's his for lifetime.

How to Use the Formula

So the formula was:

Character + Core value + Dilemma = Conflict

And when we introduce that conflict early on, we have the looming conflict that – just like the core value – lasts the entire story.

Let's take a random value and do some brainstorming.

I moved my mouse over the list of values without looking, and it landed on:

Passion.

So we have a character for whom nothing is more important than passion.

Now, the genre affects our choices, of course.

Are we writing a horror story? Or a romance? The dilemma will depend on it.

For this example, I'll pick romance.

So for our heroine, nothing is more important than passion.

How can we give her **two good or two bad things** to choose from?

What if she has a great life as an independent artist. She's famous for her paintings in her local area. She paints life in the small harbor, the small village, and the people living there.

She's also passionately in love with a handsome guy, who loves her back. He's an actor. He's offered a role in a huge sitcom, which would mean several steps up in his career. But to get it, he must move to Los Angeles. He decides to move and asks our heroine to come with him.

Now she is forced to give up one of her passions: either her work as a small-town artist or her love.

How did I brainstorm this?

I just thought: passion. What two things could she be passionate about and where would she have to choose one of the things?

I came up with work and love.

Could there be other things?

Oh yes. This was a romance, but let's take horror.

We'll make the main character male this time.

What makes him tick? What is he passionate about?

We'll let the one thing be ... (it's hard not to be affected by Stephen King novels). Anyway, King wins. One thing he's passionate about is his car.

He loves that car. He washes it and polishes it every day. It never runs out of gas or oil. And in the evening, he parks it in his garage and covers it with a blanket.

One day, a new neighbor moves in. They fall in love. He's passionate about her and wants to marry her.

But she hates his car and is jealous of the attention he pays to it. So she takes it and drives it into the nearby swamp.

When he finds out, he hires a truck to drag the car out of the swamp, but... it's haunted. The swamp won't let go of its prey, unless it gets a sacrifice: The woman who pushed the car into the swamp.

Now our guy has a dilemma. Nothing is more important to him than passion. But it's either his car or the love of his life. Which will it be?

(It might be a good thing that I don't write horror.)

Your Turn Now

The more you train yourself to come up with looming conflict, the faster the ideas will come to you.

If you're a pantsner, then doing these drills will make your subconscious work even better for you, and you'll be a natural looming conflict master.

As usual, we're going to do three different kinds of exercises.

Day One Drill

Go through the ten top rated movies on IMDB and find the looming conflict in the blurb, the tagline or the description. Here they are again:

1: The Shawshank Redemption

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/>

2: The Godfather

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068646/>

3: The Godfather: Part II

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071562/>

4: The Dark Knight

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/>

5: 12 Angry Men

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050083/>

6: Schindler's List

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/>

7: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0167260/>

8: Pulp Fiction

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110912/>

9: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060196/>

10: Fight Club

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/>

Before you start, let's take an example. I'll pick the eleventh movie on the list:

11: The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/>

The blurb says:

A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron.

Is there a looming conflict there that will be there until the end of the movie?

Yes, the Dark Lord Sauron who apparently is up to destroying Middle-earth.

Day Two Drill

Set a timer to 30 minutes and come up with as many characters, core values and dilemmas as you can. Turn those dilemmas into looming conflicts.

Genre is not important here. Just allow your imagination to run wild.

Day Three Drill

Same as day two, but this time make your characters, core values and dilemmas relate to your chosen genre.

A Hook

If your idea contains a hook, you'll automatically have that element that makes your readers go, "Woah! I need to read that."

The hook sells your book.

What is a hook?

According to Wikipedia, it is:

A narrative hook (or just hook) is a literary technique in the opening of a story that "hooks" the reader's attention so that he or she will keep on reading. The "opening" may consist of several paragraphs for a short story, or several pages for a novel, but ideally it is the opening sentence in the book. – Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_hook

The Wikipedia author continues by saying:

The hook is the nucleus of both a film and its screenplay. It is what grabs the viewer's attention, preferably in the first 5–10 minutes, as a reader might expect to find a literary hook in the first chapter of a novel.

During the pitch process, a screenwriter will use a hook to prove the "bankable" quality of their screenplay.

Pitch... Now we're getting closer to our world, right? Our High Concept idea.

When you're pitching something, you're trying to sell it. You don't necessarily sell a product. You can also sell an idea.

In our case, we'll use the hook in our idea and preferably in the blurb and description. This will make the right prospects want to pick up our books.

Let's grab a little more from Wikipedia:

Knowing the importance of a good hook, many screenwriters write their hooks first. Conceivably, the life of a screenplay might evolve from hook to 1-page synopsis, to 4-page treatment, to full treatment, to scriptment, to screenplay.

One can briefly state a good hook in one or two sentences, introducing the protagonist, the conflict that drives the story, and what the protagonist will achieve with either triumph or defeat.

The "hook" is the viewer's own question of whether the conflict can be resolved, so a screenwriter might want to test the hook by turning it into a question.

For example, "Johnny must catch the murderer so that he can get the girl" might become "Will Johnny catch the murderer? Or will he lose the girl?" In this way, the screenwriter can use the hook as a tool when writing the screenplay.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hook_\(filmmaking\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hook_(filmmaking))

Jessica Brody's version is a lot shorter.

[The Hook is] The bait that lures people into the story – usually in the form of an aspirational, fearful, or escapism element.

We can use that.

Aspirational, fearful, or escapism element.

What Is an Aspirational Element?

An aspirational element is something we long or aim for.

Wouldn't it be nice if...

It plays on our aspirations, hopes, or desires.

Like Harry Potter, who's sent off to "a school for witches and wizards." Oh, wow, how cool! Who wouldn't want to try that?

That aspirational element is responsible for the success of whole sub-genres like paranormal romances, stories about angels, magic, eternal love, and psychic abilities.

Sometimes the aspirational element, the hook, is the same as the FOW element. The two can overlap.

Harry Potter is sent off to a school for witches and wizards – he'll be a fish out of water there. But it's also the hook. The coolness factor.

What Is a Fearful Element?

We humans are amazing. We all believe that we're so unique, and yet, we love the same things, and we fear the same things.

It's universal.

Have you ever stood on a ship and looked down the deep, dark ocean and feared you would jump overboard?

I have.

And Edgar Allan Poe wrote about it many years ago.

Have you ever feared getting buried alive?

I have.

And Edgar Allan Poe wrote about it many years ago.

We fear fire, heights, insects, spiders, landslides, airplane crashes, murderers, terrorists, voodoo, curses, being alone... You name it.

A fearful element can be used as a hook, because it's so universal.

Don't get bizarre, though. Yes, there are enough people who fear garden gnomes with wheelbarrows (Nanopabulophobia), but it's not a universal fearful element.

What Is an Escapism Element?

In Denmark in the 80's, social realism was modern in literature and movies.

I read a few books in that genre, but I quickly got tired of it.

After all... who wants to spend their spare time reading about poor workers going to work and struggling to make ends meet?

Not me.

Especially back then, because I had to get up early, go to work, get through the day hoping for time to pass quickly, go home, do the daily tasks, cook, clean...

There was no way I was going to read about a hardworking woman doing the same.

I read about wolves, princesses, heroines, dangers, glory and riches.

Most of my preferred reading back then contained escapism elements. The elements that allowed me to escape my everyday world.

But even people with happy lives love the escapism element. We disappear into another culture or another time for a couple of hours. And we come back out – renewed, refreshed, happy.

If your hook has an escapism element, it's a winner. No doubt about it.

How Do You Come Up with Hooks?

Like everything else in this course, you brainstorm. You do it in different waves, one each day.

Day One Drill

Find the hook in each of the top ten IMDB movies and write down what kind of hook we have (aspirational, fearful, escapism).

Want that list again? You're a bit lazy, aren't you? 😊

Okay, then. I'll be nice and help you out.

1: The Shawshank Redemption

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/>

2: The Godfather

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068646/>

3: The Godfather: Part II

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071562/>

4: The Dark Knight

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468569/>

5: 12 Angry Men

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050083/>

6: Schindler's List

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/>

7: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King

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8: Pulp Fiction

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9: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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10: Fight Club

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/>

As usual, let's take an example.

11: The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120737/>

Here's the blurb again:

A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron.

What is the coolness factor here?

As I see it, there's more than one. There's the **aspirational** element – the meek hobbit that sets out to save the Middle-earth.

There's the **fearful** element – the threat from the Dark Lord Sauron.

And there's the **escapism** element in the promise of a journey into the danger.

Day Two Drill

Set a timer to 10 minutes and brainstorm cool characters – the wilder and the cooler the better.

Examples: a princess from Mars, a vegan shark, a talking dog, a flying toddler...

Think aspirational, fear, escapism... and then write down a number of characters.

Set the timer to 10 minutes again, and this time brainstorm cool settings.

Examples: Inside the body, a wizard school, a pink cloud, a city under the ocean, a cave...

Set the timer again to 10 minutes. This is your final run. Brainstorm cool conflicts.

Day Three Drill

Set a timer to 30 minutes.

Take your existing FOW ideas and conflict ideas and brainstorm coolness factors that fit them.

Make sure you do the steps. And then continue to the next part – A Universal Theme.

A Universal Theme

We all understand a universal theme.

Regardless of age, gender, race, and geography, we can relate to it. We've felt it, and we have an opinion about it.

When your idea contains a universal theme, it makes it easier for the reader to sympathize with your main character.

What Is a Universal Theme?

A universal theme is things like:

- Love
- Hate
- Fear
- Hope
- Courage
- Trust
- Faith
- Confidence
- Honor
- Betrayal
- Freedom
- Survival
- Family
- Revenge

- Religion

You can find more universal themes inside this free PDF file:

https://go.sdsu.edu/education/projectcore/files/03252-6_Universal_Themes.pdf

How Do You Come Up with a Theme?

Your universal theme will mostly be related to genre.

Are you coming up with an idea for a clean romance, where the heroine has a child? Then “family” could be the universal theme. Or “love” or “honor.”

Could it be “betrayal” or “revenge?”

It could... but be careful that it doesn't turn your idea into something much darker than the usual clean romance story.

You could have “survival” as a universal theme in a romance story, but love most always be the most important part.

Likewise, it would be unusual, if your sci-fi idea's universal theme was love.

Pick one of the universal themes, but make it relate to your genre.

Let's Try That Out Now

During the next three days, you'll work on the theme.

Day One Drill

Take the top ten IMDB movies once again, and find the theme (if present) in each blurb, tagline, or description.

Let's see movie #11 as an example again.

A meek Hobbit from the Shire and eight companions set out on a journey to destroy the powerful One Ring and save Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron.

Now, this is a long movie. And I would make the claim that there is more than one universal theme involved.

Survival, for sure. The whole trilogy is about saving the Middle-earth.

But it's also a movie about *friendship*. And *perseverance*, never giving up in spite of all the obstacles the Fellowship of the Ring runs into.

So taking the title into account, if we should find only one universal theme, that must be it. **Friendship**.

Day Two Drill

Set a timer for 20 minutes and pick the best theme for each of the FOW ideas you had.

Day Three Drill

Set a timer for 20 minutes and pick the best theme for each of the looming conflict ideas you had.

Putting It All Together

Have you ever learned to dance?

When I was five, I went to dance school. But I didn't last there for long.

The teacher showed us what to do – once.

I couldn't figure it out. Move your feet like this, your arms like this, and then swing your hips like this.

It was too much.

I still struggle with learning movements. The only way that works for me is to learn one movement at a time.

Move your feet like this. Slowly. Keep doing it. Got it?

Then add the arms. Slowly at first. Keep doing it.

Finally, add tempo. Yay! Now we're on a roll.

Writing is no different.

Recently, I listened to a very prolific writer who “writes into the dark” (pantsing) talking about how his books followed Lester Dent's plot structure.

Never on purpose. But it was so ingrained in him as a reader and writer that his subconscious came up with stories that followed the structure.

You Have Now Learned Every Element of a High Concept Idea

You've trained on each element separately, because that makes it easier to learn.

Now we need to put it all together into one idea.

Do It in Two Waves

As always, we'll start with the easiest step and build on from there.

The easiest here is to be completely free of genre and just come up with ideas.

Be as crazy, silly, funny, serious, dark, light as you want to be.

Nothing matters – except getting that idea down on paper.

In the second wave, you'll add your genre. Now you're bound by genre, but the limits might actually add freedom to the exercise.

If I ask you to come up with a man's name, any name... what would you say? Uhm... Any name? How about ... No, I don't know.

But if I told you to come up with names that started with C, now your brain has a structure to follow, and you'll come up with Cyril, Charles, Chad, Chris, and Claus.

Before we start the last exercises for this course, I will tell you what you can do after those.

Write the Book and Train Your Idea Muscle

Yes, that's it.

After you've done the last exercise, you have a bunch of ideas you can use.

Or you can “write into the dark” and let your subconscious do the work.

Meanwhile, you can still keep your muscle fit by coming up with one High Concept Idea every day.

How to Go from Idea to Writing?

If you want a little more support in going from idea to writing, I suggest you read this article.

I read it years ago in a magazine and was happy to find it online where you can read it for free.

Once you've read it, you can start asking questions related to your favorite ideas. Here it is:

<http://www.baboulene.com/bob-gale-back-to-the-future/>

Your Final Exercises

Are you ready? This is the final stretch before you can start writing.

Once again, grab your notebook and pen and get ready.

Day One Drill

Set a timer for 30 minutes and write down ideas that fit all four elements. You have no limits. Genre doesn't matter.

Day Two Drill

Set a timer for 30 minutes and write down ideas that fit all four elements within your genre.

Day Three and Forward

Make it a habit to come up with at least one idea every day. It doesn't matter how dull, stupid, silly, or crazy it is.

Just get into the habit of coming up with ideas.

Write them down in your notebook, so you'll always have something to come back to and ask questions about. Just like you learned from that Back to the Future article.

And as always... Have fun writing 😊

Disclaimer

The contents are based on the author's personal experience and research. Your results may vary and will be based on your individual situation and motivation. There are no guarantees concerning the level of success you may experience. Each individual's success depends on his or her background, dedication, desire and motivation.

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If you want to see my fiction and/or nonfiction related mails, you'll find them here: <https://writerbychoice.com>

About the Author

Hi, I'm Britt Malka, and I'm a full time Internet Marketer and Writer.



Knowledge is here to be shared, and I've found that you don't lose anything at all by sharing what you know with others.

On the contrary,

You gain so much more by giving.

That's why I've made it my goal to share what I've learned with as many people as possible.

Remember: Take action on what you learn and be consistent. That's how you become successful.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions about email marketing... I look forward to receiving them.

You can reach me on my email: britt@malka.biz

To your success,

Britt Malka