

Every Scene Must Have Conflict

The Source

This derives from screenplay structure principles, particularly Syd Field's paradigm (1979) and later developments by Michael Hauge and Blake Snyder. The idea: every scene should have a goal, obstacle, and outcome - essentially, miniature dramatic structure.

Dwight Swain's *Techniques of the Selling Writer* (1965) codified "scene and sequel" - every scene has conflict/disaster, followed by sequel (reaction/dilemma/decision). This was powerful structural framework for commercial fiction.

The principle was sound: **Scenes should have purpose, tension, and stakes - something must matter.**

Robert McKee elevated this to "every scene must turn" - meaning the value charge must change from positive to negative or vice versa. Still reasonable.

The Morphing

Workshop culture corrupted this through simplification:

1. **Original:** "Scenes need tension/purpose"
2. **First corruption:** "Scenes need conflict"

3. **Second corruption:** "Characters must disagree/argue in scenes"
4. **Third corruption:** "Eliminate any scene without argument"
5. **Final form:** "Characters must be antagonistic or the scene is boring"

The rule became: **If characters are getting along, the scene is pointless. Someone must oppose someone in every exchange.**

This led to fiction where everyone argues constantly, every conversation is confrontational, and characters can't have a pleasant interaction without it being "flat" or "lacking tension."

The Reality

Great fiction is full of scenes without conflict:

Marilynne Robinson (*Gilead*): John Ames writing letters to his son - scenes of reflection, memory, and love. No conflict. Profound beauty.

Kent Haruf (*Plainsong*): Multiple scenes of the McPherson brothers learning to care for the pregnant Victoria - moments of awkward tenderness without antagonism. The "tension" is internal uncertainty, not conflict.

Anne Tyler (*Breathing Lessons*): Many scenes of comfortable married boredom - Maggie and Ira driving, not fighting, just being. The ordinariness IS the point.

Colm Tóibín (*Brooklyn*): Eilis having pleasant dinners with the Italian family - scenes of connection and belonging. Their kindness matters precisely because there's no conflict.

Richard Ford (*The Sportswriter*): Long passages of Frank Bascombe thinking, wandering, observing - minimal external conflict. The tension is existential, not dramatic.

Alice Munro (most stories): Scenes of connection, understanding, or quiet revelation - the "conflict" is often just the complexity of human feeling, not argument.

When Conflict Works

Scenes of conflict succeed when:

1. **The disagreement reveals character:** What people fight about shows who they are
2. **Stakes are clear:** We understand why this disagreement matters
3. **Conflict serves theme:** The argument is about something central to the story's meaning
4. **Conflict escalates:** Each scene raises the stakes rather than repeating the same argument
5. **Conflict has consequences:** Arguments change relationships or circumstances

When Mandatory Conflict Fails

Forcing conflict into every scene fails when:

1. **Characters become unlikeable:** Everyone is irritable and combative all the time
2. **Relationships seem false:** Real people have pleasant interactions
3. **Exhaustion sets in:** Relentless argument fatigues readers
4. **Quiet moments are lost:** Tenderness, connection, or reflection get eliminated
5. **All tension becomes external:** Internal psychological tension gets ignored

Example of forced conflict:

"Want some coffee?" John asked. "Why would you assume I want coffee?" Mary snapped. "I was just asking," he said defensively. "Your 'just asking' always implies I need to be taken care of."

This is conflict for conflict's sake - manufactured antagonism that doesn't ring true.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "every scene must have conflict" - it's:

Every scene must have purpose, stakes, and tension. Tension can come from internal psychology, anticipated events, unanswered questions, or emotional complexity - not just interpersonal conflict. Something must matter in every scene, but 'matter' takes many forms.

Types of tension without conflict:

- **Anticipation:** We know something's coming
- **Mystery:** We want to understand something
- **Yearning:** Character wants connection/understanding
- **Beauty threatened:** Something precious exists but feels fragile
- **Internal struggle:** Character wrestling with decision/feeling
- **Dramatic irony:** We know what character doesn't

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Eliminating tonal range:** Everything becomes argument
2. **Destroying intimacy:** Characters can't have loving, supportive interactions
3. **Oversimplifying human relationships:** Real connection includes peace
4. **Privileging external over internal:** Psychological tension gets ignored
5. **Creating exhausting narratives:** No breathing room

Most destructively, it teaches writers that **readers only engage with antagonism**, when actually readers engage with anything that feels true, meaningful, or beautiful - conflict or not.

Some of the most memorable scenes in literature are quiet: Atticus watching his children sleep (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), Antonia and Jim remembering their childhood (*My Antonia*), or Stevens finally allowing himself tears (*The Remains of the Day*).

The actual challenge is creating scenes where **something is at stake emotionally or psychologically**, whether or not characters are fighting.