

internal and external conflict worksheet

The Power of an Internal and External Conflict Worksheet for Writers

internal and external conflict worksheet can be an indispensable tool for any writer looking to deepen their understanding of character motivation and plot development. Crafting compelling narratives hinges on the effective portrayal of conflict, both within a character and between characters or their environment. This article will delve into the multifaceted nature of conflict, exploring how a well-designed worksheet can illuminate the intricate interplay of internal struggles and external forces that drive a story forward. We will examine the essential components of such a worksheet, providing guidance on its application for various writing projects, from short stories to epic novels. By mastering the art of conflict, writers can elevate their storytelling, creating richer characters and more engaging plots that resonate with readers. Understanding the nuances of internal and external conflict is paramount to crafting believable and impactful narratives.

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Understanding Conflict in Literature

Conflict is the engine of narrative. Without it, stories would lack tension, stakes, and the compelling force that compels readers to turn the page. It is the clash of opposing desires, needs, beliefs, or forces that creates drama and propels the plot forward. Understanding the different types of conflict is a foundational skill for any aspiring or seasoned writer. These clashes are not merely plot devices; they are fundamental to character development and thematic exploration.

Literary conflict can manifest in numerous ways, but it is broadly categorized into internal and external forms. Each plays a distinct yet often interconnected role in shaping the story's trajectory and the characters' journeys. Recognizing and dissecting these conflicts is crucial for building a robust and believable narrative world. A deep dive into these elements allows writers to imbue their stories with authenticity and emotional resonance.

The Components of an Internal and External

Conflict Worksheet

A well-structured internal and external conflict worksheet typically includes several key sections designed to prompt detailed thinking about these crucial narrative elements. These sections are crafted to guide the writer through a systematic analysis of their story's core tensions. The goal is to ensure that conflict is not an afterthought but a thoroughly considered aspect of the narrative architecture.

Here are the essential components commonly found in a comprehensive worksheet:

- **Character Identification:** A space to list the main characters involved.
- **Internal Conflict Section:** Prompts focused on a character's inner struggles, beliefs, fears, and desires.
- **External Conflict Section:** Prompts focused on challenges and opposing forces outside the character.
- **Relationship Between Conflicts:** Questions designed to explore how internal and external conflicts influence each other.
- **Stakes and Consequences:** Sections to define what is at risk for the character.
- **Resolution Possibilities:** Space to brainstorm potential outcomes for each conflict.
- **Character Goals:** Clearly defining what the character wants.
- **Obstacles:** Listing specific challenges blocking the character's goals.

Developing Internal Conflict: The Inner Battle

Internal conflict, also known as character vs. self, is the struggle within a character's own mind or heart. It arises from conflicting desires, duties, beliefs, or emotions. This type of conflict is vital for creating relatable and complex characters, as it delves into their psychological landscape and moral dilemmas. Writers can explore these inner battles through a character's thoughts, internal monologues, hesitations, and difficult decisions.

When using an internal conflict worksheet, consider the following prompts:

- What are the character's deepest fears?
- What conflicting desires does the character possess (e.g., a desire for safety versus a desire for adventure)?
- Does the character struggle with a moral or ethical dilemma?
- What past traumas or experiences influence the character's current internal state?
- Does the character have self-doubt or low self-esteem that hinders their actions?

- What core belief does the character hold that might be challenged?
- Are there conflicting aspects of their personality (e.g., a kind person who can also be ruthless)?

Exploring these questions allows writers to craft characters with genuine depth, whose internal struggles make their external actions all the more meaningful. This introspection is key to a character's believable arc.

Defining External Conflict: The Outer Struggle

External conflict is the struggle a character faces against forces outside themselves. This can include other characters, society, nature, or even abstract concepts like fate or technology. These are the tangible obstacles that characters must overcome to achieve their goals, and they often directly impact the character's internal state. Effective external conflict provides clear stakes and creates dramatic tension.

An external conflict worksheet might ask questions such as:

- Who or what is the primary antagonist opposing the protagonist?
- What are the specific goals of the antagonist? How do they clash with the protagonist's goals?
- What environmental challenges does the character face (e.g., harsh weather, dangerous terrain)?
- Does the character face opposition from societal norms, laws, or institutions?
- Is there a supernatural or technological force creating obstacles?
- What specific events or situations create external challenges for the protagonist?
- How does the external conflict test the character's limits and force them to adapt?

By clearly outlining these external pressures, writers can create a dynamic narrative where the protagonist's journey is fraught with meaningful challenges, making their eventual triumphs or failures more impactful.

Using an Internal and External Conflict Worksheet Effectively

The true power of an internal and external conflict worksheet lies in its application. Simply filling it out is only the first step; the real work involves synthesizing the information to enhance the narrative. Writers should approach the worksheet as a diagnostic tool, identifying weaknesses and opportunities for strengthening their plot and character

development.

Here's how to use the worksheet effectively:

1. Brainstorm thoroughly for each character and each significant plot point.
2. Look for the interplay between internal and external conflicts. How does an external threat trigger an internal fear? How does an internal belief lead to an external action?
3. Ensure that the conflicts are escalating. As the story progresses, the stakes and the intensity of both internal and external struggles should generally increase.
4. Connect conflicts to character goals and motivations. Every conflict should have a reason for being there and serve the character's development or the plot's progression.
5. Use the worksheet to identify plot holes or areas where conflict might feel artificial or underdeveloped.
6. Revise and refine. The worksheet is a living document; revisit it as your story evolves.

Benefits of a Comprehensive Conflict Worksheet

Utilizing a detailed internal and external conflict worksheet offers numerous advantages for writers. It moves beyond superficial storytelling to create a narrative with genuine substance and resonance. The structured approach forces a deeper consideration of the story's core elements, leading to more robust and believable character arcs and plotlines.

Key benefits include:

- **Enhanced Character Depth:** Leads to more complex, relatable, and psychologically sound characters.
- **Stronger Plot Development:** Ensures conflicts are purposeful and drive the narrative forward logically.
- **Increased Reader Engagement:** Compelling conflicts captivate readers and create emotional investment.
- **Clearer Stakes:** Helps define what the character stands to lose or gain, increasing tension.
- **Identification of Plot Holes:** Reveals inconsistencies or underdeveloped areas in the narrative.
- **Improved Pacing:** Facilitates the strategic introduction and resolution of conflicts.

- **Thematic Reinforcement:** Conflicts can be used to explore and reinforce the story's underlying themes.

Adapting the Worksheet for Different Genres

While the core principles of internal and external conflict remain universal, the emphasis and specific types of conflict can vary significantly across genres. An effective writer will adapt their conflict worksheet to suit the conventions and expectations of their chosen genre, ensuring the conflicts feel authentic to the world they are building.

Consider these genre-specific adaptations:

- **Fantasy/Science Fiction:** External conflicts might involve magical forces, alien invasions, or advanced technology. Internal conflicts could stem from a character grappling with newfound powers or the ethical implications of futuristic advancements.
- **Romance:** Internal conflicts often revolve around trust issues, past heartbreaks, or fear of commitment. External conflicts might include societal disapproval, interfering families, or misunderstandings between the lovers.
- **Mystery/Thriller:** External conflicts are paramount, involving puzzles to solve, criminals to evade, and dangerous investigations. Internal conflicts might focus on the protagonist's obsession, past trauma, or moral compromises made during the pursuit of truth.
- **Historical Fiction:** External conflicts are deeply intertwined with the historical period, such as wars, social injustices, or political upheaval. Internal conflicts can arise from characters navigating these societal pressures and upholding personal values.

By tailoring the questions, writers can ensure that the conflicts they develop are not only compelling but also genre-appropriate.

Troubleshooting Common Conflict Worksheet Challenges

Even with a robust worksheet, writers can encounter challenges. Identifying and addressing these issues proactively will lead to a more refined and impactful story. The key is to be analytical and willing to revisit and revise your initial ideas.

Common challenges and how to overcome them include:

- **Conflicts feel generic:** Deepen them by exploring specific character motivations, unique backstories, and nuanced beliefs. Ask "why" repeatedly.

- **Internal and external conflicts are not connected:** Actively seek opportunities for one to influence the other. A physical threat (external) might force a character to confront a deep-seated fear (internal).
- **Stakes are too low:** Define clearly what the character stands to lose and ensure it is significant to them. What are the worst possible outcomes?
- **Antagonist is weak:** Give the antagonist clear, compelling motivations that are in direct opposition to the protagonist's. They should be a mirror or a foil.
- **Conflicts are resolved too easily:** Introduce complications, setbacks, and unexpected twists that make the resolution earned and meaningful.
- **Too much reliance on one type of conflict:** Ensure a balance between internal and external struggles to create a well-rounded narrative.

The Role of Conflict in Character Arc

Conflict is not just about creating tension; it is fundamentally about character transformation. The crucible of conflict is where characters are tested, forced to grow, adapt, and ultimately change. An internal and external conflict worksheet is therefore an essential tool for mapping out a character's arc, the journey of development they undertake throughout the story.

Internal conflicts often drive the most profound character changes. A character who starts as cowardly might, through facing external dangers, find inner strength and become brave. Conversely, a character who is initially arrogant might be humbled by repeated external failures, leading to a more introspective and empathetic internal state. The interplay between what a character believes they are capable of (internal) and what they are forced to do (external) is the bedrock of compelling character development. Without conflict, characters remain static, and their stories lose their transformative power.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary purpose of an internal and external conflict worksheet?

A: The primary purpose of an internal and external conflict worksheet is to help writers systematically identify, analyze, and develop the core tensions within their narrative, ensuring that both character-driven struggles and plot-driving obstacles are well-defined and contribute meaningfully to the story.

Q: How does an internal conflict differ from an external conflict?

A: An internal conflict is a struggle within a character's own mind or heart, involving their beliefs, fears, desires, or moral choices. An external conflict is a struggle against forces outside the character, such as other people, nature, society, or supernatural elements.

Q: Can a single event create both internal and external conflict?

A: Yes, absolutely. A single event can simultaneously present an external challenge and trigger or exacerbate an internal struggle within a character. For example, a natural disaster (external) might force a character to confront their deep-seated fear of helplessness (internal).

Q: Should every character have both internal and external conflict?

A: While it's beneficial for major characters to have both, not every minor character needs to be burdened with complex conflicts. The protagonist, in particular, should have well-developed internal and external conflicts that drive their journey and transformation.

Q: How can I ensure my conflicts feel realistic and earned?

A: To make conflicts feel realistic and earned, connect them directly to character motivations and established traits. Ensure that the stakes are clear and significant for the character. The resolution should feel like a logical outcome of the character's actions and the pressures they faced, rather than a sudden contrivance.

Q: What are some common pitfalls to avoid when filling out a conflict worksheet?

A: Common pitfalls include making conflicts too generic, failing to connect internal and external struggles, setting stakes too low, creating weak antagonists, and resolving conflicts too easily. It's also important to avoid relying too heavily on one type of conflict over the other.

Q: Can I use an internal and external conflict worksheet for non-fiction writing?

A: While the terms "internal" and "external" conflict are primarily used in fiction, non-fiction writers can adapt similar concepts. For example, a biography might explore a historical figure's personal struggles and the societal challenges they faced. A persuasive

essay might analyze the internal debates and external opposition surrounding a particular issue.

Q: How do I know when to stop working on my conflict worksheet?

A: The worksheet is a tool, not a final product. You should continue to refine it as long as you are developing your story. It's time to feel confident when the conflicts are clearly defined, interconnected, serve the plot and character arcs, and the stakes are compelling.

Q: What is the relationship between conflict and theme?

A: Conflict is a primary vehicle for exploring and conveying a story's theme. The types of conflicts characters face, how they choose to resolve them, and the consequences of those choices often reveal the underlying message or insight the author wishes to impart to the reader.

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