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Internal and external conflict examples

There are two types of conflict in every story: internal and external. Both are necessary to make a good and relatable story, but usually a book will focus on one type of conflict over the others. Below is an explanation of each and examples for practical application. I know it was easier for me to understand the differences when I had stories to pair with each one. Internal conflict is often also referred to as Man vs Self. It's the type of conflict that comes from two opposing sides of a character. It could be conflicting beliefs, fears, or desires. The character has to find a way to reconcile these issues within his own mind, and it's usually a journey of self-discovery. Rodion Raskolnikov murders a woman and spends the book contemplating the act. He argues with himself about murdering her, then about justifying the act and using the stolen money for charity, then about whether he should confess to the crime. The book is full of self-examination. Emma's main problem in this book is herself. She gives bad relationship advice which backfires on her, she denies her affection for Knightley, and she struggles with the unrealistic high regard she holds for herself. Her story is one of self-discovery and growth. The whole play is about Hamlet's belief of being a good Christian conflicting with keeping his oath to kill his uncle and avenge his father's death. The famous "to be, or not to be" soliloquy is the epitome of Man vs Self. External conflict is when outside forces create conflict for the character. It's something out of the character's control, and he has to learn how to deal with it. External conflict is divided into three categories: Man vs Man, Man vs Society, and Man vs Nature. This is when two people have opposing views and goals, and they work against one another throughout the story. If it's done well, the reader will understand and even sympathize with both sides. At the beginning of the book, Edmond is betrayed, and he spends the rest of the book seeking revenge on those who wronged him. Edmond's goals conflict with the betrayers' goals and form the main conflict of the story. The main conflict in this book is Peter's rivalry with Hook. This whole series is about how Voldemort's ambitions contrast with Harry's, and how they battle against each other to reach their own goals. Although one person can be used to symbolize society as a whole, this is generally when the character struggles against the collective. It could be the government, popular opinion, social norms, or any group that can make a character feel oppressed. Hester Prynne is publicly shamed for committing adultery and shunned by the community as a whole. You can't get more Man vs Society than that. Guy Montag lives in a society where he burns books for a living. When Guy breaks that status quo and starts to read the books instead, he is oppressed yet fights back. Darrow takes on the governing body of his world. While his people are oppressed, others live well. Darrow, in disguise, infiltrates the higher classes and puts a plan in motion to topple the government. The primary point of conflict is a force of nature. It can be a natural disaster, wild animals, or a disease. Like internal conflict, there is a lot of internal analyses since nature cannot argue with the character. Often, the character will contemplate things like mortality and regrets. The family is marooned on an island due to a storm, and they struggle to survive in a wild and hostile environment. The book is about hunting a giant white whale who is characterized as a monster that plagues the crews of many ships. Mark is abandoned on Mars. He is in one of the most hostile environments possible and is all alone. The story is literally one man verses nature. Books can have more than one form of conflict, but most focus on one above the rest. Look at your bookshelf and see if you can assign each of these types of conflicts to a book. It's good practice for recognizing what your main conflict is in your own story. Once you know that, it'll be easier to write it clearly and resolve it in the end. Thanks for reading! Write a tale Leave a trail Published on 10 July 2023 5 min read What is Internal Conflict?What is External Conflict?Practical Uses of Internal ConflictExamples of Internal ConflictPractical Uses of External ConflictHow to Balance Internal and External ConflictExamples of Balanced ConflictImagine you're reading a captivating book or watching an engaging movie. You're drawn in by the complex characters, the riveting plot, and the way the characters face challenges. The heart of these challenges? Conflict. It's the engine that drives the story, creating tension, suspense, and intrigue. But did you know that there are two primary types of conflict in storytelling? Let's dive into the fascinating world of internal vs. external conflict.Defining Internal and External ConflictThe world of storytelling is full of hurdles and challenges that our beloved characters must overcome. These hurdles come in two main types — internal conflict and external conflict. Understanding the differences between these two can add depth to your writing and reading experiences. So, let's break down what each type of conflict entails.What is Internal Conflict?Internal conflict is a struggle that happens within a character's mind. It's like a psychological tug of war. For instance, consider Hamlet from Shakespeare's famous play. Hamlet wrestles with a moral dilemma — whether to avenge his father's death or not. This is a classic example of internal conflict.What is External Conflict?External conflict, on the other hand, occurs outside of the character. This type of conflict is usually with an opposing force, such as another character, society, or nature. Think of Harry Potter's endless battles with Lord Voldemort in J.K. Rowling's iconic series — that's a prime example of external conflict.Now that we've defined internal and external conflict, it's time to look at how they differ from each other. This understanding will help you appreciate and navigate the complexities that lie in the heart of your favorite stories.Distinguishing Internal from External ConflictWhile both types of conflict are vital to storytelling, they have distinctive characteristics that set them apart. Understanding these key differences can help you identify and appreciate the nuances in a narrative. Let's delve into these differences.Key Characteristics of Internal ConflictInternal conflict often deals with decisions, fears, and dilemmas. Here are a few key elements of internal conflict:Psychological: It usually involves a mental or emotional struggle within the character. This could be a moral quandary, a fear, or a desire.Introspective: It encourages self-reflection in the character, leading them to examine their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.Character Development: It often plays a big part in the character's growth or transformation throughout the story.Key Characteristics of External ConflictExternal conflict is about outside forces that pose challenges to the protagonist. Here are a few distinctive characteristics of external conflict:Physical: It often involves a physical struggle between characters, or against nature or societal norms.Action-Packed: It usually drives the action of the story, leading to climactic battles or confrontations.Plot Development: It often propels the plot forward, creating tension and suspense that keeps the audience hooked.By distinguishing between internal and external conflict, you can better appreciate the intricacies of your favorite books and movies. Now, let's take a look at how these types of conflict play out in practice.Applying Internal ConflictInternal conflict is a powerful tool in storytelling. It adds depth to characters, creates emotional resonance, and drives personal growth. But how do we apply it effectively?Practical Uses of Internal ConflictInternal conflict can be used in various ways to enhance a narrative:Character Development: Use internal conflict to challenge your characters' beliefs and force them to grow or change.Creating Suspense: Keep your audience guessing by creating internal conflicts that leave them uncertain about what the character will do next.Adding Depth: Use internal conflict to explore your characters' fears, desires, and motivations, adding complexity to their personalities.Examples of Internal ConflictLet's illustrate these concepts using some examples from popular culture:Hamlet's Dilemma: In Shakespeare's "Hamlet", the titular character struggles with the decision to avenge his father's murder — a classic example of an internal conflict.Frodo's Struggle: In "The Lord of the Rings", Frodo battles with the corrupting influence of the Ring, creating a powerful internal conflict that drives the character's development.Walter White's Transformation: In "Breaking Bad", Walter White's transition from a mild-mannered teacher to a ruthless drug lord is driven by internal conflicts about morality and survival.Applying internal conflict effectively can create compelling, relatable characters and drive narrative tension. Next, let's explore how external conflict is used in storytelling.Applying External ConflictWhile internal conflict is a battle within, external conflict comes from outside. It's the showdown between the hero and the villain, the clash between opposing forces, the obstacle that our protagonist needs to overcome. So how do we apply external conflict to make our stories more engaging?Practical Uses of External ConflictExternal conflict serves several important purposes in a narrative:Driving the Plot: It provides the main obstacle that propels the story forward.Defining the Stakes: It establishes what's at risk and why the outcome matters.Highlighting Character Traits: It reveals aspects of a character's personality under pressure.Examples of External ConflictLet's consider some examples of external conflict from popular stories:The Death Star: In "Star Wars", the Rebel Alliance's fight against the Death Star provides a clear external conflict.The Jurassic Park: In "Jurassic Park", the struggle for survival against dinosaurs is the main external conflict.The White Walkers: In "Game of Thrones", the Seven Kingdoms' battle against the White Walkers is a key external conflict that drives the plot.By effectively applying external conflict, you can create a dramatic narrative that keeps your audience hooked from start to finish. But what happens when you combine both internal and external conflict? Let's find out in the next section.Using Both Internal and External ConflictWhen a story uses both internal and external conflict, it becomes a potent narrative. This combination helps to create multi-dimensional characters and intricate plot lines, which can captivate the audience.How to Balance Internal and External ConflictBalancing internal and external conflict is like walking a tightrope. Lean too much on one side, and the story becomes either too introspective or too action-driven. Here are some tips on achieving a good balance:Interweave the Conflicts: Make the external conflict a reflection of the internal one. For instance, a character's fear of heights (internal conflict) becomes critical when he has to scale a tower to save someone (external conflict).Let Conflicts Evolve: As the story advances, allow the conflicts to change and grow. This keeps the narrative fresh and engaging.Use Conflict to Show Growth: Use the resolution of conflicts to show character development. Overcoming external conflict could lead to resolving internal conflict, symbolizing personal growth.Examples of Balanced ConflictWondering how to master the balancing act between internal and external conflict? Here are some examples:Harry Potter: In J.K. Rowling's series, Harry battles Voldemort (external conflict) while also dealing with his fears and insecurities (internal conflict).The Hunger Games: Katniss Everdeen faces the deadly Hunger Games (external conflict) while struggling with her feelings and moral dilemmas (internal conflict).Toy Story: Woody fights to reclaim his place as Andy's favorite toy (external conflict) while dealing with jealousy and fear of abandonment (internal conflict).Remember, a well-crafted story skillfully balances both internal and external conflict. The result is a narrative that resonates deeply with readers. So, are you ready to create your engaging tale of internal vs. external conflict?If you're interested in diving deeper into the concepts of internal and external conflict, we highly recommend checking out the workshop titled "Instant Gratification vs Longevity Within Your Projects" by Celina Rodriguez. This workshop will provide you with valuable insights into the differences between short-term satisfaction and long-term success within your creative projects, and how to effectively balance both to achieve your goals. Learn from world-class creators Graphic design & Illustration Screenwriting & Directing Songwriter & creative director Graphic design & Illustration Screenwriting & Directing Songwriter & creative director Ask questions, get tailored feedback and learn in interactive sessions from the industry's brightest creators. Where creators learn together Learn from industry-leading creators across film, fashion, art, photography, design and more. Commit to your creativity Live classes every day Learn from industry-leading creators Get useful feedback from experts and peers Best deal of the year /mo* * billed annually after the trial ends. /mo* *Billed monthly after the trial ends. Ah, conflict: an essential component of any narrative. It's what makes stories, well, stories — without conflict, they'd just be scenes where characters politely agree on everything.Conflict can be divided into two broad categories, internal and external. An internal conflict is a psychological struggle that a character faces within their own mind, while an external conflict is with some kind of outside force.Both are compelling in their own right, but by weaving them together, you can elevate your story from good to great. In this post, we'll go over a few different ways to intertwine the internal with the external (along with examples) and create a captivating conflict of your own.Mastering the internal/external balanceFirst off, let's consider not just what internal and external conflict are, but how they function and balance each other in a story. A story's external conflict creates tangible obstacles that drive the plot forward, while an internal conflict reveals a character's emotional state.If the external conflict takes up too much of the spotlight, your protagonist's personal growth might feel like a footnote compared to the action, making their triumph ultimately feel bland or unearned. Conversely, too much emphasis on a character's internal conflict can create a slow, meandering story that struggles to keep readers engaged; this inner turmoil can only drive the narrative so far without meaningful external stakes. To strike a satisfying balance, give both conflicts enough room to influence one another and grow together. The relationship should be cyclical: your protagonist's external challenges should push them to confront their internal dilemmas, which then go on to inform their external choices.This pattern should continue, with each development building on the last until your story's resolution — which should, ideally, resolve both the internal and external conflicts.Let's now cover each side of this proverbial coin, and take a look at some examples to see this conflict cycle in action.Have external challenges trigger internal dilemmasIf your character is experiencing an internal conflict, ask yourself: why? Something must have happened that's causing them to reconsider their identity or beliefs.Perhaps they had a chance encounter that challenged their worldview, or maybe a long-buried regret has resurfaced, forcing them to reevaluate their choices. You can take this idea a step further by having your story's primary external conflict act as the catalyst for your protagonist's internal dilemma. Example: The Dark KnightAt the beginning of The Dark Knight, Bruce Wayne has a clear understanding of his goals: to eliminate organized crime, keep the "good guys" in power, and inspire hope in Gotham City. Unfortunately for our caped crusader, his main thrust this time around is the Joker: a crazed clown determined to make Batman break his moral code.The Joker exerts deep psychological pressure on our hero, forcing Batman to question whether his presence in Gotham is doing more harm than good. Batman's morals are pushed to their limits when he must use an extreme, overreaching surveillance system to track the Joker's location — causing his friend and collaborator, Lucius Fox, to express his dismay.The external conflict with the Joker feeds Batman's internal dilemma: can you justify ethically questionable methods if they are rooted in noble intentions? While Fox eventually shuts down the surveillance system, Batman is haunted by the choices he's made, realizing he has to serve a different purpose to Gotham's citizens... which is why he sacrifices his reputation at the end of the film, allowing them to continue believing what they "need" to believe.Let internal conflicts affect external decisionsOf course, instead of an outside-in approach, some stories prefer to work from the inside-out. Our thoughts, feelings, and worldview inform the decisions we make on a day-to-day basis, and this same principle applies to fictional characters as well.A troubled protagonist may have unresolved internal issues that escalate their external challenges — creating a narrative where a character's inner demons directly manifest in the conflicts they face. Seeing a character recognize their inner struggles, reflect on how these struggles inform their actions, and work to improve (or in some cases, lean into) their flawed decision-making processes is fascinating, and almost always satisfying... especially when the results of their internal change help resolve the external conflict. Example: The Remains of the Day by Kazuo IshiguroThe Remains of the Day, Stevens the butler faces an internal dilemma that's probably all too familiar: balancing personal fulfillment with professional duties. One way this manifests is in his relationship with Miss Kenton — the housekeeper for the stately home where Stevens has spent most of his career.Despite the obvious emotional connection they share, Stevens adamantly distances himself from Miss Kenton during their years of service. He denies himself potential romantic happiness out of a rigid adherence to "dignity", worsening his own external situation.Sadly for Stevens, his moment of self-realization comes too late. The penny drops during a meeting with Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) years later, when Stevens finally recognizes that a lifetime of misguided priorities has led to his present loneliness.Unlike more optimistic stories, The Remains of the Day illustrates how repressing one's inner feelings results in external stagnation and isolation, producing a detrimental feedback loop. And while Stevens ends the novel with a renewed desire to make the most of his sunset years, he must do so without Miss Kenton by his side.Mirror, mirror, in the narrativeWe've discussed how internal and external conflicts can shape one another, but this relationship can also go beyond simple cause-and-effect. In certain stories, the external conflict is not just a catalyst for internal growth, but actually a physical manifestation of a character's inner struggles.Here, the external world doesn't just reflect the character's emotional woes — it becomes an active extension of it, transforming abstract experiences into concrete, tangible realities. This technique provides an extra layer of depth that amplifies the stakes of both struggles. Example: The Metamorphosis by Franz KafkaAn unfulfilling job and emotional distance from his loved ones has left salesman Gregor Samsa feeling disconnected from his own well-being. Unfortunately for Gregor, he soon finds himself alienated from his physical well-being as well — when he awakens to find his body has been transformed into that of a "monstrous vermin."It's telling that Gregor's first thought after his transformation concerns his ability to work. Indeed, before the change, Gregor's life was barely distinguishable from that of an insect. He drifted from place to place, working to support a company and family that didn't recognize his efforts. Now, the external matches the internal, his new form acting as a representation of how Gregor has been feeling: small, insignificant, and detached from his own humanity.While this might seem a bit zany, plenty of writers have employed similar methods for intertwining internal and external conflict. Other examples include Margaret Atwood's novel The Edible Woman, or how Billy Pilgrim becomes "unstuck in time" in Slaughterhouse-Five. If this technique piques your interest, I'd recommend studying up!And remember, however you choose to combine internal and external conflict in your own story, it's the combination — in whatever form — that makes them all the more effective. Letting these conflicts feed into each other creates a more layered, immersive narrative that readers will remember long after they turn the final page.(c) Nick Bailey/Nick Bailey writes about books and publishing for Reedsy, a publishing platform that connects authors with editors, designers, and marketers. From honing your plot to navigating the world of self-publishing, Nick's blog posts aim to provide valuable insights and practical tips to the entire Reedsy community and beyond. Aside from reading, Nick enjoys hiking, electronic music, and filling up his personal cookbook with new recipes. See here for a previous article from Nick Bailey on How to Write More Believable Characters. This article was originally published in October 2021 and updated in September 2023. All stories, however short, need conflict: a clash between two (or more) people, groups, ideas, or even motivations. Conflict is the engine that powers your story, driving it forward. Without conflict, there's not much of a story. Your main character knows what they want, they pursue it wholeheartedly, and nothing stands in their way. That's not a story – it's an anecdote. So if your story doesn't seem to be working, if the pacing feels slow or the plot seems thin, then that might be due to a lack of conflict. And if your story feels rather one-dimensional, then that could be because you only have one type of conflict. Different Types of Conflict Make Your Story More Interesting The most obvious type of conflict in literature is between a "goodie" and a "baddie". This type of conflict comes up a lot in the bedtime stories I read when my kids were younger. Superheroes fight supervillains ... and the heroes prevail. But even in those stories, there's often some other element of conflict. For instance, in one of the Spiderman stories we used to read, Peter Parker is enjoying a trip to the zoo with MJ ... but he has to sneak off and don his spidernaut (along with his secret identity) to fight the Sinister Six. As adults, we expect our stories to have multiple layers of conflict. Take the Avengers movie, for instance (a family favourite in our house). There's conflict between a number of different groups: between Loki and his forces and the Avengers, most obviously, but also conflict between Loki and Thanos, who he's working with. Within the Avengers team, there's a lot of interpersonal conflict, especially between Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Steve Rogers (Captain America). There's also internal conflict – e.g. with Bruce Banner's struggle to control his alter ego, the Hulk. So let's dig into some different types of conflict and how you can use them effectively. We'll start by looking at internal vs external conflict – the two broad types of conflict you can use in your story. What's Internal Conflict? Internal conflict takes place within your character. Often, it'll be prompted by or influenced by external conflict: for instance, your character might face self-doubts (internal conflict) because they're being bullied at school (external conflict). Internal conflict is a fight between two parts of yourself. It can be a big part of what your character suffers. Plus, it's often crucial for character development: if the better part of the character wins the fight, then the character grows as a person. Your character might face a struggle between doing what's right and what's easy. They might be under a lot of pressure. Let's say they're struggling to pay rent and they have the opportunity to steal a large sum of money, without anyone knowing. Or your character might have to face doing something brave versus staying safe. That could involve an act of physical bravery – but it might also be an issue of moral bravery (e.g. speaking up at work about an unfair situation, even if that could lead to punitive action). One of the great things about short stories and novels is that it's easy to show internal conflict. You can bring us right into a character's thoughts as they grapple with a dilemma – showing us not only what they decide, but why. In a movie or TV show, it's easier to show external conflict vs internal conflict (because it's straightforward to dramatise). Examples of internal conflict include: Self-doubts, where your character isn't even sure what they want. Fears that hold your character back from taking action. Temptations that your character considers giving in to. False ideas about oneself (or the world) that your character is struggling to overcome. What's External Conflict? External conflict happens when your character knows what they want and is ready to go for it ... but someone or something is standing in the way. That opposing force could be another human being (such as a school bully, supervillain, or just a neighbourhood busybody). It doesn't need to be an enemy or antagonist, though. Your character might be opposed by someone who's ostensibly on their side, like a parent or friend. They may care deeply about your character's wellbeing, but still get in the way of their goals. For instance, a friend might try to talk your character out of going for a promotion, because they're worried your character won't cope with the stress of the new role. External conflict doesn't have to be between two people. It can be between your main character and society as a whole – though this will often be shown through individual opponents. And keep in mind that you don't need to pick external conflict vs internal conflict: often, they'll tie into and reinforce one another. Another form of external conflict is environmental conflict, where nature itself stands in the way of your character's goals. The most obvious form of this is in stories where a character is struggling to survive against the odds, in a harsh, desolate, or dangerous environment. This type of conflict could also involve a human character against wild animals. Examples of external conflict include: Physical fights with other characters. Threats from other characters, particularly those in authority (e.g. a boss, police, headteacher). Derision because your character doesn't conform to their society's standards in some way. Danger from nature itself, such as from cold, heat, exposure, drowning, or lack of food/water. For plenty of other ideas, check out my post on Making Bad Things Happen to Good Characters. Internal vs External Conflict: Which is More Important? I believe you need some internal and external conflicts for a good story ... and ideally, those conflicts are going to feed on and reinforce one another. Depending on your genre, though, you may have more of an emphasis on external or internal conflict. For instance, if you're writing an action-adventure or thriller novel, the conflict might be primarily external: you have a character fighting against external forces and prevailing. Your character might have moments of self-doubt, but those aren't going to pull focus. On the other hand, if you're writing a romance, a lot of the conflict could be internal: all about who loves who, whether characters can overcome fear, pride, or temptation, and so on. There'll likely be a good dose of interpersonal (external) conflict in there, too. In general, external conflict is likely to be the driving force pushing your story forward. If you lean too heavily on internal conflict, you may find that your story feels slow-paced or lacking in tension. Using Internal and External Conflict Effectively in Your Story How, then, do you use internal and external conflict in your story? Whether you're writing a short story or a full-length novel, these tips should help. 1. Make the Conflict Fit Your Story The conflict should arise from your characters' personalities and from the situation they find themselves in. Don't just throw in lots of conflict for the sake of it. If you feel that your story needs more conflict, look at ways that could come about. For instance, if your main character is very passive, it's unlikely to make sense for them to suddenly start a bar fight ... but they might end up in a situation where they've upset a friend due to their inability to say "no". 2. Focus on Your Character's Response to the Conflict The exact nature of the conflict within your story doesn't matter so much as how your character responds to the conflict. Do they immediately go looking for a fight? Do they stop and work through a plan? Do they give in to despair all too soon? Their reaction can tell us a lot about them. It can also drive the plot – especially if their attempts to resolve the conflict end up creating more difficulties for them. 3. Use Your Character's Flaws and False Ideas What are your main character's flaws? Perhaps they're brave and loyal ... but also rather rash. Think of ways this flaw can cause conflict or make it worse. It's also a good idea to think about what K.M. Weiland and others call your character's "ghost" – the false belief they have about themselves or about the world. This will often play heavily into their internal conflict, and overcoming it will be a big part of their character arc. 4. Set Up "The Right Thing" vs "The Easy Thing" A good way to create internal conflict is to force your character to choose between doing "the right thing" and "the easy thing". Whatever type of story you're writing, there's almost sure to be an opportunity for this. Maybe your character faces the choice between telling the truth – even though that might have unpleasant consequences – and telling a lie. Or perhaps they're faced with a dangerous situation where doing the right thing means putting themselves into harm's way, instead of walking on by. 5. Resolve the Conflict by the End of the Story Internal conflict is often resolved along the way within the story, though it may not be fully overcome until the character's arc is complete. But external conflict may carry on throughout a story, particularly when it's interpersonal. Remember, readers will want to see this satisfactorily resolved by the end of your story: we want to see the bully get their comeuppance, or the smarmy lying colleague finally get caught out. Don't leave loose ends when it comes to major conflicts, or the reader will feel a bit cheated. Conflict strengthens your characters, deepens your plot, and drives your story forward. Using both external and internal conflict well means you'll craft a gripping story that draws readers in and keeps them hooked ... right until the end. Want more tips on writing fiction? Make sure you join the (free!) Aliventures email list. You'll get my weekly newsletter emails (which cover fiction plus a range of other writing-related topics), blog posts straight to your inbox, and three exclusive mini-ebooks about writing.