

External Conflict Themes Worksheet

External conflict plays a crucial role in a protagonist's internal journey. It can catalyze the plot that sends the character on his ride, and can mirror or contrast his personal struggles. As a result, the impact of the external conflict on the protagonist – and on readers – can reflect the some of the story's literary themes.

If you're curious about how your story's external conflict expresses themes, the External Conflict Themes Worksheet can help! For the first two sets of activities, you'll brainstorm "what if" scenarios about your story's external conflict and then dissect possible themes. The third activity asks you to consider the reasons for and consequences of your character's actions in regards to the external conflict before determining themes.

This worksheet is based on the activities in my DIY MFA article ["Developing Themes In Your Stories: Part 3 – The External Conflict,"](#) and is most effective once you've prepared a story pitch or completed the [Premise Themes Worksheet](#).

Instructions:

1. Frame Your "What If" Scenarios

Once you've developed a premise sentence / story pitch and identified the external and internal conflicts, consider how your story would be different if the external conflict had never happened. How would your protagonist's circumstances change? Would he have faced the same obstacles or hardships? Would he still have fought for his goals and learned the same lessons?

Here are three sample "what if" scenarios from published books:

- **Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*:** What if the chimera and the seraphim weren't at war? Would Madrigal (a demon) and Akiva (an angel) have met and fallen in love? Would anyone have dared to dream of peace between the two races?
- **Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*:** What if the story didn't take place in WWII-era Germany? Would the Hubermann family's decision to hide a Jewish man in their basement still have been considered a crime? Would Liesel have lost her birth family and been forced to move into a foster home?
- **Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*:** What if civilization and most life on Earth hadn't been destroyed by an apocalyptic disaster? Would the unnamed father and his young son still struggle to survive every day? How would their relationship be different?

External Conflict Themes Worksheet

Activity #1A: Pick three to four published novels you've read. Ask yourself how the protagonist, his/her circumstances, and the world at large would be different if the external conflict hadn't happened. Write your responses in the blank space below.

Activity #1B: Using the same method as in Activity #1A above, create a "what if" scenario(s) for your story, using the blank space below to jot down your ideas.

External Conflict Themes Worksheet

2. Identify Which Lessons Would Be Lacking or Lost

The key to finding possible themes in your “what if” scenario is by going “backwards.” Instead of looking for what lessons or high-level concepts would be learned or gained, look for what would be lost or never achieved. This emphasizes not only how the external conflict influences the internal journey, but also why the story is important to begin with.

Below are some themes unearthed from the sample “what if” scenarios in Step #1:

- ***Daughter of Smoke and Bone***: war, peace, hope, love
- ***The Book Thief***: war, compassion, loss, family
- ***The Road***: mortality, family, isolation, resourcefulness

Activity #2: Carefully study your “what if” scenario(s) from Activity #1B. What ideas would be lost if the story never took place? What lessons would the character never learn because his internal journey hadn’t been triggered? How would the story’s world at large fail to change as a result? List any possible themes below.

External Conflict Themes Worksheet

3. Determine the Reasons for and Consequences of Your Protagonist's Actions

Reasons: Something has to motivate the protagonist to react (or, in some cases, launch) the external conflict. If you sum up that motivation in one word, you'll often find it's a high-level concept – a possible literary theme.

- Hero A rebels against the government because he believes its leaders abuse their authority. (**injustice**)
- Hero B volunteers for a bone marrow transplant to help his cancer-stricken friend. (**friendship**)

Results / Consequences: The outcome of a character's actions often impacts or is impacted by the external conflict. Depending on the specific details, these successes, failures, and the reasons for such results can be boiled down into concepts that represent literary themes.

- Hero A joins other rebels and leads an uprising that topples the government. (**power, sacrifice, loyalty**)
- Hero B's friend dies despite the bone marrow transplant. (**mortality, courage, love**)

Activity #3: Consider your protagonist's actions in regards to the external conflict. What does he do? Why does he attempt these actions? What is the outcome of each action? List specific concepts that represent motivations, reasons, or results / consequences below.

BONUS: When you're done with Activity #3, compare your new list of possible external themes to the list created in Activity #2. Do you see any common themes?