

The Protagonist–Antagonist Relationship Themes Worksheet

A novel's protagonist and antagonist share a tense yet unique relationship: They make each other's lives difficult as they strive toward their separate – and often clashing – goals. And not only does this constant struggle between both characters propel the story forward, but it also emphasizes some of the story's literary themes.

The **Protagonist-Antagonist Relationship Themes Worksheet** is designed to help you discover any themes that arise from the friction between these characters. Using the content and brainstorming exercises from my DIY MFA article “Developing Themes In Your Stories: Part 7 – The Protagonist-Antagonist Relationship,” you'll examine the protagonist's and antagonist's interactions and opposing goals in order to understand why their conflict exists, and then determine possible themes from there.

[Click here to read the DIY MFA article](#) before trying the following exercises.

Instructions:

Print out a copy of this worksheet, and (if possible) have a print or electronic version of your WIP and relevant character profiles (protagonist and antagonist only) available.

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1. Know Your Antagonist As Intimately As You Know Your Protagonist

Antagonists are no different from other characters in our stories. We should know them inside and out – even as well as we know our protagonists – so we can make them believable and (as crazy as it may sound) sympathetic. It's sensible and fair, since both characters will oppose each other throughout the story.

Before you start writing your story, spend some quality time with your antagonist. What are his goals and desires? His strengths and weaknesses? His fears and vulnerabilities? How did his childhood or any traumatic experiences influence who he is now?

Activity #1: Free-write for 30 minutes about your WIP's antagonist. Explore as much about this character as possible, from qualities and flaws to goals for the future and traumatic experiences from his/her past. If you've already explore your protagonist's arc themes, use the questions you explored then for this exercise as well.

Feel free to use a blank page or Word document to complete this activity.

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2. Pit the Antagonist's Goals Against the Protagonist's

If the protagonist and the antagonist are going to spend so much time at each other's throats (both figuratively and literally), they should have conflicting goals. What those goals are will depend on which element acts as your story's seed:

- **If you think of plot / external conflict first...** Consider what needs to be resolved by the end of the story. What will the protagonist need to do to achieve this resolution? How would the antagonist's role conflict with this? Why?
- **If you think of characters first...** Consider what the protagonist needs or wants to accomplish. How could the antagonist prevent this from happening? Why?

In either case, remember to ask “why.” Why does the antagonist want what he wants? Why doesn't he share the protagonist's goal? Understanding the root of the antagonist's desires will inform other aspects of the antagonist's character, including the measures he's willing to take to reach his goals and his potential reaction if his worst fears come true.

Don't forget that different types of antagonists exist. Usually they come in the form of other characters. However, the environment, the government or an organization, or even the protagonist's darker self can also play the role. In all cases, the antagonist's goal or function should hinder the protagonist's ability to reach her goal.

Activity #2: Using the antagonist from Activity #1, compare his goals with those of the protagonist from the same WIP. How and why do these goals conflict with one another? What is the antagonist willing to do in order to get what he wants?

Use the blank space below, the back of this page, or your free-writing page or document from Activity #1 for your answers.

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3. Ensure There's a “Why” to Their Interactions

Not only should the antagonist and the protagonist have opposing goals, but their conflict needs to play out on the page. These scenes should also have a reason for occurring. In other words, why these characters interact is just as important as how those interactions unfold.

Consider the “how” first. What kinds of scenes do the antagonist and the protagonist share? What do they talk about? How do they behave toward one another? Then, determine the “why.” What do these characters want from each other right now? Why do they act toward one another the way they do? It's also possible to start with the “why” and then determine the best way of portraying it through a scene.

This can be tricky if the antagonist is abstract (environment, the self) instead of human (other characters, an organization). In this case, you may want to look from the protagonist's perspective and understand why she's struggling.

Activity #3: Review any scenes in your WIP that feature the antagonist and the protagonist. What happens in these scenes? What dialogue do the characters share? What actions do they take? How do they act and react toward one another? Most importantly, why do their interactions play out in this manner?

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4. Get to the Heart of Their Conflict

[DIY MFA's working definition of "theme"](#) reminds us that themes a) are high-level concepts that recur throughout a story, and b) tie in with the protagonist's "driving forces" (goals, fears, and desires). Since the protagonist's goals impact the antagonist's and vice versa, it makes sense that the antagonist's "driving forces" would also influence theme.

Once you've examined how the protagonist and antagonist affect one another, see what themes rise out of their relationship. Review each character's motivations and the reasons for their actions and reactions. What are they individually fighting for? Do their fundamental values differ? Or, are they more similar than the characters – and you – had originally thought?

Activity #4: Revisit your answers to Activities #2 and #3. What high-level ideas or concepts emerge from the protagonist-antagonist conflict? How do they reveal themselves through the characters' competing goals and their interactions?

Use the blank space below, the back of this page, or your free-writing page or document from Activity #1 for your answers.