

Stakes & Proportion

Stakes

In every story you must ask yourself, “What’s at stake?” Is it money? Life? Death? A country’s safety? A planet’s safety? What happens if the hero fails? For a story to have punch, the stakes must be high. The higher the stakes, the better the tension. **Stakes are what makes the reader care.**

There are two types of stakes:

1. **Personal and Internal:** If I don’t stop gambling, I’m going to lose all my money.
2. **Impersonal and External:** If Hitler isn’t stopped, generations of people will be killed.

The BEST stories have BOTH. Well-rounded characters must deal with personal challenges while also working to solve the external problems in the outside world (or whatever the conflict is in the story).

Stakes force characters to make decisions, which moves the story forward. Some choices result in a positive **gain** (a war is won, two characters fall in love, the team wins the national championship despite all odds), but some choices result in the **prevention of further loss** (a serial killer is caught, a mad king is overthrown). The BEST stories have BOTH. Again, this increases the tension. Just like real life, there are good and bad choices that result in good and bad outcomes.

To help identify and define stakes in your own story, ask yourself these questions:

1. What would happen if the protagonist just walked away?
2. What sacrifice must the protagonist make for everything to be okay?
3. What is a predictable outcome?
4. What events could be better if combined?

While good storytelling takes readers out of their comfort zones and suspends their belief, **melodramatic narratives are exhausting and unbelievable.** Not everything is life or death!

Proportion

Time spent on minor points and events throws a scene out of proportion. Likewise, a story with too much dialogue or too much narrative puts the whole story out of proportion. Everything needs balance - action, dialogue, narrative. The same concept applies to movies and television.

Because there is no equation to follow here, **writers must develop their own style and rhythm.** Always be asking yourself - Have I explained this scene well enough? Can I cut some words? Am I Resisting the Urge to Explain (R.U.E.)? Am I dragging out an exciting scene so far that now it’s become boring?

You will understand proportion as you read more books and stories. Some books are fast-paced and energizing to read, while others are slow and dull. Over time, you’ll catch onto proportion in other works and will be able to apply better pacing to your own works of fiction.