



The Lantern English Co.
The Creative Writer

Character Workshop: Antagonists – Syllabus

Course Description: Strong conflict can't exist without a strong antagonist. Throughout this character workshop, we'll discover how to create just that: a powerful yet relatable antagonist. As we craft our own antagonists, we'll not only build characters, but we'll explore literature, history, and our previous works. As the course is focused on the student's character creation, highly individualized feedback and advice will be provided weekly along with the weekly grades. *Prerequisite: Creating Living Characters.*

Course Outline:

Week One: The Obvious Question

Week Two: The Basics

Week Three: Relationships & Relatable Traits

Week Four: Character Growth

Week Five: Before the Conflict

Week Six: During the Conflict

Week Seven: After the Conflict

Week Eight: The Playground

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Creative Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.



Character Workshop: Antagonists

Lesson One: The Obvious Question

SAMPLE LESSON

You have encountered a wide variety of antagonists on the page, stage, and screen: dastardly kings, Bond-style nemeses, mean girls, perhaps even a force of nature. However, to start this course off right, we have to answer one obvious question . . .

THE OBVIOUS QUESTION: WHAT IS AN ANTAGONIST? –

Although individual antagonists will act and function in different ways, there are a few characteristics that you'll find in them all. The antagonist is the foil to the main character; usually shows strong negative character traits (if human) like greed, anger, or jealousy; and will decide the fate of the story. To get more technical, Merriam-Webster defines an antagonist like this:

1 a person who opposes another person

. . . and a villain like this:

2: an uncouth person

3: a deliberate scoundrel or criminal

4: a character in a story or play who opposes the hero

5: one blamed for a particular evil or difficulty

No matter what word you use, an antagonist is *not* the kind of person you want as your best friend. They're often nasty and deliberately bad, but sometimes they may just want something that places them at odds with the protagonist.

We will work more on these specific characteristics in next week's lesson, but look for them as we explore the following four main types of antagonists. (You will remember them from *Creating Living Characters*.)

VILLAIN TYPE: DETERMINED ZEALOT –

Maybe he's the mad scientist, maybe he's just a determined cop, but Von Evildoer is out to stop your hero at all costs. He will fling all the obstacles possible in her way, give her trouble at every turn, and try to get the rest of the world against her, too. Odds are that he will be stronger, backed by greater forces, or somehow otherwise better—at least, by appearances. It is unlikely that he will turn into a good guy, and if he does, it will be a dramatic and powerful moment. Whatever his goals are, he is zealous in his pursuit. This antagonist is a good choice if you are looking for fast-paced tension in your plot.

- **Two Tips to Create:** Give him a powerful motive (revenge, loyalty, law, etc); let him be stronger, faster, or otherwise better than your hero (as aforementioned).
- **Prime Example:** Javert (*Les Miserables*)

VILLAIN TYPE: EVIL OVERLORD –

It's downright creepy, but this guy is everywhere. He controls everything. You turn your head and—GAH! There he is! Fighting an evil overlord is just plain intimidating. To make it worse, your hero probably won't even come into direct contact with the overlord until the end of the story. Most of his time will be spent challenging the minions and, maybe, a zealot-type second in command. The evil overlord is good for creating a dramatic, overwhelming conflict, and keeping the reader excited (and frightened) about the final climax.

- **Two Tips to Create:** Make him seem impossible to defeat (already controls everything, has a huge army, etc); make him mysterious (we're all a little afraid of the unknown).
- **Prime Example:** The Master (*Doctor Who*)

VILLAIN TYPE: RIVAL –

So, maybe she is not going to kick a puppy or blow up the world, but she's still in your hero's way. There is something that your hero has that the rival wants. Whether it's a job, a prize, a love interest, or just a steak sandwich, the rival will do anything to possess it. (This can work when subverted, too—maybe the rival has something that the hero wants.)

Unlike the zealot, the rival is somewhat likely to turn to the good side. She might come to realize that the hero deserves the prize more than she does, or the hero might allow her to keep whatever it is, making the rival see the true meaning of friendship. (Cliche? Totally, but it can be done well.)

A rival is a good choice of antagonist if you aren't looking for a fast-paced, good-versus-evil kind of plot. They also fit in well with realistic fiction or slice of life stories. A rival can serve as a secondary antagonist, too—you could have an evil overlord and a rival, for instance, to change up your story.

- **Two Tips to Create:** Make her as realistic a character as you can. (A lot of people make rival types incompetent or, conversely, overly perfect. This can work, but it can also turn out unbelievable.) Also, give her a reason to want the thing the hero wants—it won't add much tension to the story if it's just a random whim she might give up on at any point.
- **Prime Example:** Cinderella's stepsisters (here you see the incompetent side)

VILLAIN TYPE: UPHOLDER OF THE STATUS QUO –

Okay, he might not seem like a terrible guy—no puppies are being kicked and there's no dungeon—but he is committed to the way things are, and your hero is making waves. Doesn't your hero know that this is *how we've always done it*? Maybe this antagonist is happy with how his dystopian government keeps him living in comfort while everyone else fights to survive. Maybe he is certain that the only right decision is the same right decision that the business has been making for years, even though times are changing. Either way, your hero's inconveniencing him, and that has to stop.

- **Two Tips to Create:** Don't forget the sympathetic, relatable traits! If this antagonist sat down with your hero for long enough, they'd agree on *something*. Also, think about your worldbuilding and the antagonist's backstory. What led to this investment in the status quo?
- **Prime Example:** Skinner (*Ratatouille*)

VILLAIN TYPE: MONSTER –

Unlike our other types, which are usually human, the monster is—well—not human. It is terrorizing the countryside, yes, but that's probably just because it is all it knows. It is a monster, an alien, a dragon, an oversized dog, who knows. A monster antagonist is the hardest to make “living,” because it is the hardest to relate to. I don't know about you, but I've never been a hoarding dragon. One easy way to make it more relatable is to give it one or two human qualities, or qualities of an animal we naturally like (an adorable kitten or puppy, for instance).

The monster can also serve as a great secondary antagonist. Maybe your hero is going head to head against her rival to defeat the monster. Maybe an evil overlord is using the monster to achieve her whims. Who knows!

A monster can also make a good antagonist for a classic heroic story (think medieval ballads and ancient legends).

- **Two Tips to Create:** Make it scary (fangs, claws, scales, you name it), or make it surprising (wait, we were told that there was a monster in this cave—and it's a big fluffy poodle?).
- **Prime Example:** Smaug (*The Hobbit*)

VILLAIN TYPE: ABSTRACT ANTAGONIST –

Our final antagonist is the strangest of all—it doesn't even exist! It is a concept or a problem, something that affects the hero or those around him. It could be sickness, sadness, hunger, doubt, or some natural disaster like a hurricane. An abstract antagonist is best for a story focusing on the hero's growth, since you will be able to clearly show how she comes to overcome her challenges. Sometimes, a story with an abstract antagonist will be less tense and action-packed than the one with another antagonist type, since you can't punch hunger in the face (unfortunately).

- **Two Tips to Create:** Think carefully about why you are choosing your abstract antagonist, and research how it affects real people.
- **Prime Example:** A storm (*Robinson Crusoe*—a storm caused his shipwreck. He also battles with doubt and disease at some points in the story.)

Assignment 1: Do Your Research

For this assignment, we want you to go back to your own experiences with antagonists. No, not in real life (unless you *have* been a hoarding dragon, in which case I want to hear about it).

Tell me about 3 antagonists that you really loved in some professional work. This can be a book, a short story, a TV show, or a movie.

Answer the questions on the next page about each of the antagonists. Your answers to each question must be at least two complete sentences.

Questions :

1. What is his/her name, and from what book/TV show/story/movie/etc does he/she hail? Who created this antagonist?
2. What made you love this antagonist?
3. Which category of antagonist does he or she best fit with? Why?
4. If you were to change one thing about this antagonist, what would it be? Why?
5. Who was pitted against the antagonist? Why?