

# Build a Better Story Sampler

From Chapter Two: Story Construction

## CONTROLLING IDEA

Along with developing all this material, there is one other component that I spend a lot of time on. This has to do with the climax of the story. In some of the other chapters I emphasized the need to establish the story's ending in advance of starting the first draft. Initially, it may be sufficient to say, "bad guy dies: end of story," but the climax has to be the best part of the tale, so this brief phrase has to be expanded into an action scene or scenes that will keep the reader turning the pages. How I approach the expanded view of the climax is to develop what Robert McKee (in *Story* pp. 115-117) calls the "Controlling idea." Essentially, this consists of two components: a character value and the cause that produced that value. The first is the primary value that the character experiences at the conclusion of the story and the cause is the mechanism that brought that value into being. These two components are then expressed as a single sentence. This sentence is the Controlling Idea and it controls the entire story, since the single most important purpose of the story is lead the reader to this ending. The story line mentioned above should begin with controlling idea and focus on directing the story to the climax.

As an example, here is what I used in a fantasy/scifi novel:

*Drakin's (the Protag) Value: Life is good*

*The Cause behind this Value: working together to save their world, Drakin and Higginbottom (Drakin's main squeeze) come close together.*

*Controlling idea: In defeating the invaders, Drakin & Higginbottom find true love*

Form Chapter Three: Motivation

## WHY DID HE JUST DO THAT?

Quite often the reason a character does something or the reason he responds as he does is lost to the reader. This confusion occurs because the author has neglected to include the character's motivation in the scene or the snippet of action. A snippet is a short piece of action embedded into scenes. It contains a stimulus sentence or two followed by a character's response. This sequence of action is also called cause and effect. Unfortunately, the two elements are frequently reversed to the confusion of the reader.

Sometimes the motivation is apparent, such as when a character jumps behind a wall when he hears a shot. In this case, the reader doesn't have to have the motivation explained to her. When a reaction isn't that apparent, it is essential that the author describe the character's motivation or stimulus. In the following snippet of a scene, Jody is a minor character who the reader knows nothing about:

*Danny worked on the old car and whistled a nameless tune.*

*"Hi Danny," Jody said, giving him a big smile.*

*"Shut up or I'll make you shut up," Danny snarled.*

*Jody turned on her heel and left.*

The reader is left clueless why Danny snarled at Jody.

Many times when this problem surfaces, it has to do with a character reacting angrily, even violently, for no apparent reason. It's as if the author understands the need for tension or conflict, but inserts it randomly into the story without defining the character's motivation. This artificial tension will come across as contrived and will be

counterproductive. This type of motivation-less action occurs more often than you'd think possible and turns reading a story from an enjoyable pastime into a chore.

From Chapter Nine: Writing a Scene

#### EMOTIONAL ARC

A basic requirement for a scene is to include an emotional change in the POV character. If the character's emotion is positive at the beginning of the scene, then it should be negative at the end. As an example, Character A feels good at the start of the scene. Everything is going his way and he is confident that he will solve the scene problem. By the end of the scene, he must be in a funk because an unexpected obstacle arose and derailed his scheme to fix things. Similarly, if the character's love life is grand at the scene opening, it should be on the rocks at the end of the scene. Or if the couple starts out fighting or arguing, they should be smooching by the end of the scene.

A scene that goes emotionally from plus to minus should be followed by a scene that goes emotionally from minus to plus. The point is to put the reader's emotions on a roller-coaster so that those emotions are never stable for very long.

I think the major problems that many writers face in developing a new scene are ones of not knowing the character sufficiently and second, not getting inside the head of the POV character when you are writing a scene. I mentally picture my characters acting out the scene (as if they are on stage) and I focus my attention inside the POV character so that I am writing what he sees and feels. Then when something happens, I know what his thoughts are and what his motivation is, hence I can predict how he should react to the stimuli and thus build the emotional arc.