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# SCREENWRITING

*Master the art of writing movie scripts*



EMMY-WINNING DIRECTOR

Jason J. Tomaric

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## The Protagonist

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### THE PROTAGONIST

As you're writing your screenplay, the most important character to understand is the protagonist - the character who is ultimately in support of the story goal and must overcome a personal issue in order to achieve that goal. Believe it or not, the protagonist doesn't necessarily have to be the good guy – and in many good films, he isn't. He or she can be likable, funny, despicable, evil, passive, smart, foolish, or well-intentioned, but regardless of his personality temperament, he is always for the story goal – stop the war, save the girl, prevent the asteroid from destroying Earth, prove his innocence, or solve the crime.

## Protagonist and Main Character

We often think of the protagonist as the main character. Sometimes he can be, but other times the protagonist and main character are two completely different people. The decision as to whether to write the protagonist as the main character, or as separate characters depends on what perspective you would like to give the audience as they're watching the movie. Generally, if the protagonist is the main character, the story is told from a much more objective view-point, whereby the audience sits on the sidelines watching the drama unfold. We watch things happen to the protagonist, we see how he behaves, and we can cut away from the protagonist to see what the

### Ken Dancynger

Author, "Alternative Scriptwriting," and "The Technique of Film and Video Editing and Writing the Short Film"



*Protagonists can be likable, they can be despicable, they can be evil, they can be passive, they can be anything, but whatever they are - let's say you have a negative main character, you want to tell the story about someone who really is a despicable human being. Well your responsibility as a writer is to surround them with... gradations - it's like the world, you need good people and probably, if you want us to like [the protagonist], a few people who are more despicable.*



antagonist is doing. But by creating a main character that is separate from the protagonist, the audience becomes that main character, seeing the story unfold through his or her eyes. The audience doesn't have to be linked to the protagonist throughout the entire story. This subjective view can bring the audience in closer to the story.

For example, in *The Terminator*, the protagonist is Kyle Reese – he is for the story goal of stopping the Terminator and saving Sarah Connor. The story isn't told from his perspective though – it's told through the eyes of Sarah Connor, which enables the audience to experience the events of the story as she does. As the pawn in the middle of the struggle between the Kyle and the Terminator, she's

**Actor Brian Ireland plays Bobby Jones, the lead character in 'Time and Again.' Remember that characters should be real people with a complete history that helps shape their behavior in each scene. Know your characters, their motivations, what they want, and what they will do to get what they want.**



*Try graphing the protagonist's emotional arc in much the same way you might map out a story arc. It will help you visualize the characters journey – his emotional state, his mindset and his attitudes. You'll see where he is most vulnerable, where the stakes are highest, and where he is at his breaking point. You will then be able to pace the protagonist's emotional journey across the scenes.*

afraid, she learns, she runs, she fights, and we the audience can put ourselves in the shoes of an ordinary woman caught in the struggle between a robot killer and futuristic rebel fighter. Imagine how different the story would be if the story were told from the perspective of Kyle Reese.

The genre of the story will influence whether the protagonist is also the main character. In horror films, it makes sense for them to be one in the same – the story goal is to defeat the threat and stay alive. As the main character, we also experience the story through our protagonist's perspective. Conversely, in a drama, separating the two can add a powerful perspective, much like in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which the story is told through the eyes of the young girl, Scout.

### Changing or Staying the Same

We often hear about how the protagonist must change during the course of the story. Sometimes this is true, but in some stories, the goal of the protagonist is to stay the same as his environment or circumstances change around him. For example in *The Fugitive*, Dr. Richard Kimball must fight to prove

his innocence while his entire life crumbles around him. He will be successful if he is able to restore his life to the way it was before the inciting incident – the murder of his wife. He must remain steadfast while his environment changes.

Steadfastness is more prevalent in certain genres, such as in the horror and action genres, where the protagonist must stay the course in order to survive. Conversely, the romantic comedy or drama usually requires the protagonist to confront his tragic flaw and overcome it in order to achieve the story goal – such as to get the love interest.

*The Protagonist, by himself, is an objective character in the big picture, and the main character is a subjective character that can bring a unique perspective to the story.*

### Chris Huntley

Academy Award-winning creator of "Scriptor," and co-creator of "Dramatica"

*Many stories use the main character as a separate or subordinate character, or... sidekick or any of the other characters in the story... In "The Terminator" you have Sara Conner, [who] is the main character, you see the story through her eyes, but Kyle Reese from the future is the one who comes back to save her, which is the goal, and of course we have the bad guy... who comes back from the future to kill her.*





In the James Bond series, Bond doesn't undergo a character change in each movie – he remains steadfast. He never realizes that killing is bad, or that the love of one woman trumps sleeping with dozens. The man we see at the beginning of the story is the same man we see at the end. But while Bond remains steadfast, his environment changes – the adversary tries to destroy the world and kill millions, wreaking havoc in the process.

In short, for a steadfast protagonist, life is good until a problem falls into his lap and he has to get rid of the problem, holding true to his ideal values and hitting the ever-changing problem harder until he wins. Changing characters will be tried by some consistent problem and will change into a better or worse person because of it.

## Neil Landau

Writer, "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," "Melrose Place," "The Magnificent Seven," and MTV's "Undressed"



*You can also have a very subjective point of view, where the protagonist is in every scene and we are only seeing what the protagonist sees, and that kind of point of view is used a lot in paranoia thrillers where we only know as much as the protagonist knows, and so we are discovering things at the same time as the protagonist. It very much depends on genre - that's an early question you need to ask - what's the point of view of the story.*

So the protagonist must either undergo a change in a consistent environment, or remain steadfast in a changing environment. While your choice will be influenced by the genre of the story, it is key to understand when choosing which path your protagonist will take.

## Flawed Characters

One of the most important ways to make a protagonist – or any character – real, is to make them flawed. Psychologically, most character flaws are rooted in shame - the fear that people will reject us and that we will not be able to make connections with other people if they know about our flaw. This fear can be rooted in any number of reasons – not feeling physically attractive, fear of abandonment, fear of abuse, fear of not being good enough. Although there are many reasons, the biggest manifestation of this fear is believing you're not good enough to be loved.

## Guy Gallo

Writer, "Under the Volcano," "Tales from the Darkside," and "American Playhouse"



*The character has a desire or ambition, or a view of the world... that is in some way off, it's missing the mark, it's not perfect... and it's the story that unravels the character's coming to terms with the ways in which he was off from society, or off from his passion.*

Every person on the planet has flaws – some of them can be fixed and some cannot. Flaws that can be fixed, or tragic flaws, make us who we are. It's feelings of insecurity, anger, resentment, heartbreak, fear of commitment, fear of vulnerability, or fear of death. If we can overcome these fears, then we are on a path to becoming a better person. But if we let these flaws get the best of us, they can lead to our demise – depression, suicide, isolation, and even death. These flaws – called fatal flaws – are impossible to recover from.

Much like ourselves, our story characters must also have flaws. The protagonist must wrestle with a tragic flaw, which threatens his own existence. The closer to a fatal flaw it comes, and the closer he comes to losing himself to the flaw, the greater the stakes.

In a story in which the protagonist changes, the change occurs through him facing his tragic flaw and emerging victorious against it. Usually he is able to do this by confronting the conflict in the story – the events, challenges, and hurdles of the conflict force the

## Neil Landau

Writer, "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," "Melrose Place," "The Magnificent Seven," and MTV's "Undressed"



*All character flaws are routed in shame. Shame is a universal emotion and shame is the fear of disconnection, it's the fear if someone really knew our vulnerabilities and knew our flaws they would reject us. We would not be able to make connections with other people, and we fear that we would then not be worthy of love - which is the most common fear that all people share... because character flaws are routed in shame what we do is try to hide them, we wear masks... we go out of our way to over compensate and cover up our deficiencies... What really good movies do is strip our all those defenses and strip away that armor and they force characters to become more and more venerable.*

## Chris Huntley

Academy Award-winning creator of "Scriptor," and co-creator of "Dramatica"



*The main character will have a unique ability, which is a quality that makes them suited for make the goal, in the big picture, achievable, which means they... hold the key... They have that special something that is absolutely necessary for the big picture to end in success. But they also have a critical flaw, which is something that undermines that unique ability, something that either prevents them from imploring that unique ability or undermines their credibility or effectiveness of their unique ability. It allows the writer to play with that sort of yin and yang, the 'I can do it' and 'I'm my own worst enemy is part of it'*



*A good tragic flaw is always on the verge of becoming a fatal flaw unless the character does something to turn it around.*

protagonist to look inside himself to face his flaw. In a good script, the act of solving the story conflict gives the protagonist the tools he needs to fix his personal flaw, and in facing his personal flaw, he finds the power to resolve the story conflict.

The protagonist's back story is where you can create an event or circumstance that caused the protagonist to be flawed, or broken, or incomplete. This hurdle prevents him from realizing his full potential. Perhaps the main character is gay and didn't come out till later in life. His childhood was one of lies and emotional control that impacted his ability to be emotionally vulnerable. Or perhaps the protagonist was a victim of child abuse, unable to trust authority figures and unable to open up to people. Or maybe it's physical handicap that made the protagonist feel as though he wasn't good enough to be successful. Write the back story so you know what happened to the character, how it has affected him, and how the events of the story help him face these flaws and either overcome them or succumb to them.

Much like in real life, the protagonist himself may not know what is causing his problems – he can only see the symptoms. Whereas the problem may

be invisible to the character himself, others around him are aware of it and recognize it; specifically the impact character who helps the protagonist overcome this obstacle. As the story unravels, events of the plot help reveal to the character how he was broken. His blinders come off and he must forgive himself or forgive someone else in order to overcome the flaw.

Neil Landau

Writer, "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," "Melrose Place," "The Magnificent Seven," and MTV's "Undressed"

*The goal is to create an iconic character, a character who stands the test of time, who's fascinating, who is indelible 'cause they're so unique. For me that means creating a character, where embedded in the character is a core contradiction. So... if you were painting the characters with three colors, two of the character would go together and one wouldn't. It's, what is wrong with this picture? What doesn't fit? So, I always look for... Who is this person, what's this person's thing on the external level and then what's buried... what's repressed, what are we not seeing, what are they conscious of, not expressing because of shame or some element of not feeling free to express it.*







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analyzing characters  
in the FilmSkills  
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## Creating Dimension

The most interesting protagonists to watch are those who seem real – but how do you write a real person? Creating dimension and depth to a character can be challenging, but doing so is critical to engage the audience.

For starters, the protagonist must be a proactive pursuer of the goal of the story. While this is the very definition of a protagonist – the character most *for* the story goal – he must also do so with complete emotional conviction. She **MUST** stop the killer from murdering another child. He **MUST** prevent the train from being blown up. She **MUST** convince her best friend's fiancé to marry her. The more emotionally invested in the outcome the protagonist is, the more heartfelt the audience is when obstacles get in his way.

Another technique for creating dimension is to distill the character's traits down to three basic traits – two that fit, but one that doesn't. For example, our hero may love children and is very religious, but struggles with a cocaine addiction. Or our character may be a mafia member who works as a hit man, killing men by day, yet he loves his family and believes in supporting the local school board to

ensure his 8 year-old daughter gets the best possible education. By adding one incongruous trait, the protagonist will be much more interesting to watch.

Often, writing a character who does the opposite of what we expect is interesting and engaging. The audience likes to be one step ahead of the filmmakers, and if you give them what they're expecting, they'll be bored. Creating a character who breaks the mold and behaves in unexpected ways will pull the audience in, making them want to see what the character will do next.

## Tips to Writing a Strong Protagonist

- **Make your protagonist relatable** – The audience always experiences the events of the story through the eyes of the protagonist, and the more in line that character is to our own thoughts and feelings, the deeper into the narrative the audience will be drawn. Create a protagonist who is real, who does real stuff like forget his car keys, picks out mismatched socks, spills his coffee; the more human he becomes, the more we relate to him.
- **The protagonist must be flawed** – Perfect people are uninteresting and provide a challenge to the writer, so by writing a flaw with which the protagonist struggles – be it addiction, abuse, insecurities, a phobia, a mortal fear, or a physical impediment – you can add stumbling blocks, and more importantly, humanity to your leading character.
- **Your protagonist must make a choice** – When thrust into the center of the conflict, the protagonist must make the critical decision – usually in the third act – that will lead to either success or failure. Typically, the decision on which option to

choose is guided by facing his or her critical flaw - the personal flaw with which the character struggles throughout the story. It's only in facing this flaw that he will find the answer and choose the best possible outcome.

- **Make your protagonist active** – The active protagonist is a story driver because he does what he wants to do, acts on his beliefs and convictions, and will take whatever pain comes from those decisions. The protagonist must either react to an action, thereby creating another reaction, or he must act then deal with the consequences. Regardless, always give your protagonist a sense of purpose that always moves the story forward.
- **Make sure the audience relates to why the character is doing something** – We as the audience certainly don't have to like their actions or behavior, but if we understand why, and know that we would make the same choice in their shoes, then we will relate. Walter White in *Breaking Bad* is a prime example of a character who commits truly evil, heinous crimes, but the slow, calculated, and understandable decent into the dark work of meth allows the audience to agree with his behavior until - late in the series - when we realize that we have been condoning and justifying murder.
- **Throw as much pain and suffering at your protagonist as possible** – The more the protagonist suffers and is beaten down, the more we will root for him to pull out of it. The deeper the rut, the more victorious the ascent, and this is certainly the case in writing a striking character. Put her through hell and back, make her life as difficult as possible, and raise the stakes, and you will have the audience on your protagonist's side throughout the entire story.



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## The Antagonist

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### THE ANTAGONIST

The antagonist has been classically referred to as the bad guy, the villain, or the adversary. But more properly defined, he, she, or it is the literary opposite of the protagonist – the character or force that opposes the goals of the protagonist.

Sometimes, the antagonist wants the same results as the protagonist, but goes about it in a different way. For example, in *The X-Men*, both Charles Xavier and Magneto want equal rights for mutants, but Xavier prefers a more diplomatic, peaceful approach to Magneto's goal of killing all non-mutants. Other times, the goals of the protagonist and antagonist are diametrically opposed. Loki wants to destroy the earth and enslave humanity while the Avengers want to save the earth and its people.



## Chris Huntley

Academy Award-winning creator of "Scriptor," and co-creator of "Dramatica"



*The Antagonist and the protagonist will often want the same thing but for different reasons, so in "The Dark Night," for example, Batman is trying to clean up Gotham city and get rid of all of the crime and all of the... dark elements, he's trying to do that by cleaning up the city. The Joker wants to rid all of its darkness and bad elements but he believes that it's beyond saving and so he just feels he needs to destroy everything in order to accomplish it.*

## Xander Bennett

Writer, "The Colour of Fear," and Author of "Screenwriting Tips...You Hack"



*A good villain should be almost the dark mirror of the protagonist, they should be everything that the protagonist stands for the villain should stand for the opposite. They should be very, very similar people really. That's really old and powerful dramatic trick is to make the villain what the protagonist would eventually turn into if they didn't have they're more nobler, better qualities.*

Many times, the antagonist is a parasite-like character, bent on controlling or hurting other people. They will stop at nothing in their quest for power, usurping resources to do so. The antagonist finds their power outwardly, often through hurting people and causing damage, while the protagonist's power comes from within.

Drama in the story is created when the protagonist and antagonist fight over the story goal. In a well-written script, the balance of power shifts back and forth, sometimes with the protagonist being the stronger character, and other times, the antagonist. As the story evolves, the antagonist grows stronger and stronger, nearly defeating the protagonist. It's only when the protagonist can confront his inner conflict that he can find the power to defeat the antagonist.

The greater the tension of the power struggle, the more the audience will question if the protagonist will emerge victorious.

## Antagonist and Genre

The antagonist's form, power, and capabilities vary greatly based on the genre of the story, which heavily influences the way the antagonist appears, and the way he challenges the protagonist. For example, in action or fantasy, the antagonist is big and powerful – almost larger than life, while in a character drama, the antagonist can be as simple as time, illness, or a conflict between lovers.

### Chris Huntley

Academy Award-winning creator of "Scriptor," and co-creator of "Dramatica"



*The more important the genre is your story the broader you can draw your character, so, for instance, if you're doing something that is more of an action adventure, sci-fi, or fantasy then you could really make your antagonist big and just amazingly powerful but if your emphasis isn't on genre, let's say it's more on character than you don't want to go quite so out there because they're going to seem cartoony.*

### Neil Landau

Writer, "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," "Melrose Place," "The Magnificent Seven," and MTV's "Undressed"



*Take a romantic comedy for example the antagonist may just be the love interest because antagonists challenge the comfort zones of the protagonist and so in a movie like "When Harry Met Sally," for example, Harry is afraid of intimacy, Sally falls in love with him so she's is antagonist because she's gonna challenge him to feel things that he doesn't want to feel... Howard Suber... says, "While all villains are antagonists, not all antagonists are villains."*



The antagonist's role is to challenge the comfort zone of the protagonist. Whether it's a god-like creature summoning the powers of the netherworld to threaten our superhero protagonists (*The Avengers*), or a wife threatening a questionable yet unstoppable love (*Brokeback Mountain*), the antagonist forces the protagonist to act by pulling him out of his day-to-day life and into the center of the conflict.

Generally, the simpler the scope of the antagonist, the more personal it is. In dramas, in which the antagonist is the competing love interest, someone fighting for survival, or circumstance, the antagonist's journey can be heart-felt and emotional. Conversely, in large action films, the antagonist's actions are about *actions* – not *emotion*. We don't need to get into the mind of the Terminator, Loki, or the Green Goblin as much as Hannibal Lecter, The Joker, or Samuel Gerard.

As you write your antagonist, make sure it is in proportion to the demands of the genre. A weak creature in a horror film is just as bad as an over-the-top threat in a romantic comedy. Balance the antagonist so it's appropriate to the story.

### Trap of Cliché

One of the easiest traps to fall into as a writer is to create a cliché, flat villain – the mustache twirling, pure evil villain, who has no sympathetic qualities. One way of avoiding this trap is to think of an amazing hero and make them the villain. Remember, the antagonist need only be against the story goal, which – depending on the genre – allows you to make them as multidimensional as the protagonist.

An outstanding technique for helping the audience relate to the antagonist is to make him sympathetic. The more the audience understands and sympathizes with the antagonist's plight, the more

### Xander Bennett

Writer, "The Colour of Fear," and Author of "Screenwriting Tips... You Hack"



*They can't just be evil for the sake of evil because that doesn't really exist in real life and it feels false in stories. Nobody wakes up in the morning thinking, I'm gonna be evil, and I'm gonna ruin the world, or hurt other people... They are doing what they're doing for reasons that are very important to them. They think they're the hero of their own story... The evil things they are doing they are justifying themselves for various reasons.*

### Guy Gallo

Writer, "Under the Volcano," "Tales from the Darkside," and "American Playhouse"



*The greatest quality you need to find for an antagonist is, ironically, sympathy, that there's something about what they want that is recognizable and I think their threat has to be believable.*

effective he will be. Think of Charlize Theron's character in *Monster*. Although she is the main character, she does evil, despicable things – luring men as a prostitute, then killing them as a way of avenging her past. We, as the audience, completely empathize with her position in life, and almost forgive her murderous actions.

Evil for the sake of evil is never as effective as evil actions motivated by good intentions. The more an audience can put themselves in the antagonist's shoes, the scarier they become.

## Neil Landau

Writer, "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead," "Melrose Place," "The Magnificent Seven," and MTV's "Undressed"



*Use the ultimate antagonist as an example: Adolph Hitler. Hitler didn't view himself as a villain he viewed himself as the hero of his own story... Hitler thought he was unifying Germany, he was saving their economy, he was purifying mankind by exterminating the Jews. In his point of view he was a hero, he was doing really good heroic things, obviously nothing could be further from the truth, but I think it's important to write antagonists like they are right.*

## Creating Dimension

Much like the protagonist, a good writer will create an equally deep and engaging antagonist, complete with back story and motivations. A three-dimensional character with sympathetic goals makes the antagonist much more interesting, even if his goals are only sympathetic to himself.

One way of helping the antagonist feel more "real" is to make them likable. The audience may sympathize with his goals, and ultimately feel a stronger connection to his objective in the story.

Another way of creating a dimensional antagonist is to take the time to develop the character's back story – that is, the events in that character's life leading up to the events of the story. Everything that happens in his past informs the decisions he makes now and in the future. Determine what past wounds, traumas, and events shaped the antagonist into the person he is now, and why has the past causes him to behave the way he does.

Remember that good people do bad things, and an antagonist may be behaving in a way he thinks it right.



*The genre of the story has the greatest influence on the size and power of the antagonist. The bigger the genre, the bigger the antagonist. You're not going to see a lonely housewife in middle America threatening a group of five superheroes from another planet.*

## Tips to Writing a Strong Antagonist

Whereas the antagonist can take many forms, such as the environment or a ghost, here are some guidelines for writing a convincing human antagonist:

- **Make your antagonist as real and flawed as your protagonist** – Your antagonist is just as much a real person as the protagonist. He has a goal, is justified in his mind in the pursuit of that goal, has likes and dislikes in life, and - most importantly - has a tragic flaw. It is this flaw that may motivate the antagonist to do the evil he does, but it comes from a deep wound. To get the audience to recognize and understand this wound is to create a memorable, engaging, and sympathetic character.
- **Make your antagonist a literary equal to the protagonist** – The antagonist should be just as smart, charming, driven, and innovative as the protagonist. If not, then the imbalance between the good and evil forces will not create enough conflict to create a believable story.
- **Treat your antagonist as what the protagonist could become** – The protagonist has a moral compass which guides his actions. If he were to disregard this internal guide, then he would become the antagonist. The antagonist is a temptation, he's a symbol of one possible manifestation of the protagonist. For example, in *Star Wars*, Darth Vader represents what Luke *could* become if he chose the dark side. This temptation adds conflict, allure, and pressure to the protagonist.
- **Make your antagonist realistic** – In every story, there are rules, physics, what is possible, and what is not. Always write your antagonist so he operates by the rules of the world

you create. By doing this, he will always be believable. In a present day crime drama, the antagonist is a regular man -he cannot fly, disappear, or use magic on his victims; but, in a fantasy genre, he can. Always keep your antagonist true to the environment.

- **Don't make your antagonist too powerful** – It can be tempting to give your antagonist such a range of power that he becomes impossible to defeat, and even worse - uninteresting. The audience will relate to the antagonist if he has to work to achieve his goal as hard as the protagonist must work to achieve his. This is often the problem in some comic book movies where the antagonist is so powerful, able to conjure the deepest energy of the universe, that the audience gets lost - how can the good guys possibly defeat him? The solution is usually as grandiose and absurd as the antagonist's power, creating an even further disconnect from the audience's reality.
- **Don't make the antagonist evil all the time** – Real people are nuanced. We all do things in life that are good, and bad. Just as the protagonist shouldn't be a bastion of goodness and virtue, neither should the antagonist be a cornucopia of all things evil. A well-written antagonist will do good; the crime lord who just killed five men, may be running late for the school board meeting because he wants to make sure the schools doesn't cut the music program out because of budget cuts.

All in all, make your antagonist a layered, nuanced person with flaws, intention, and desire, whose narrative ambitions happen to be the opposite of the protagonist.

# SCREENWRITING

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### *About the Author:*

Jason J. Tomaric is an Emmy, Telly and CINE Award-winning director and cinematographer. With dozens of commercials, feature films, documentaries, and music videos on the market, Tomaric has worked in over 20 countries. Tomaric has taught at some of the most prestigious film schools in the nation, and has developed FilmSkills – the largest online film school that services over 50 universities and has trained thousands of aspiring filmmakers.

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