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Connecting with Audiences Through Character Emotions

By **Martha Alderson, M.A.**

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Moviegoers and readers identify with stories through the characters. The most powerful way to reach an audience is through the characters' emotions. For only when we connect with the characters on an emotional level, does the interaction become deep and meaningful. Well-written scenes that include characters' emotions allow the audience to viscerally take part in the story and bond with the characters.

In real life, we meet and interact daily with other people. Unlike in stories, many of these interactions are fairly superficial. Though some audience members rather enjoy a more distanced, intellectual challenge, most want to engage with characters in books and movies on an emotional level, too. Therefore, as a plot consultant, I developed the Scene Tracker Kit to help writers track scene-by-scene their characters' emotions. To reinforce the significance of emotion in creating compelling scenes, two of the seven essential elements on the Scene Tracker template involve emotion.

1) Character Emotional Development: The characters' emotional development as it leads to their ultimate transformation at the overall story level.

2) Emotional change: The character's more fleeting emotional reactions at the scene level.

Often writers get stuck by staying in the character's head and "telling" what the character thinks. An emotion, on the other hand, has a strong physical component and is primarily felt in the body. The writer is able to "show" emotions through how the character relates or reacts to conflict.

Definition of Emotion

Emotion literally means "disturbance." The word comes from the Latin *emovere*, meaning "to disturb." Characters who reside more in the mind and their thoughts than in their body and their emotions put distance between the story and the audience. Thoughts can lie. Dialogue can lie, too. However, emotions are universal, relatable and humanizing. Emotions always tell the truth.

Most of us in real life are capable of handling ourselves when things are going well or working in our favor. Throw in some sort of disaster, conflict, roadblock and we find out who we truly are. This same principle applies in stories. Moviegoers and readers alike want to participate in dramatic stories to learn how characters respond emotionally when things turn messy, challenging, and stressful, when all is lost.

Storytelling involves more than lining up the action pieces, arranging them in a logical order and then drawing conclusions. Yes, dramatic action pulls moviegoers to the edge of their seats. And yes, conflict, tension, suspense and curiosity hook moviegoers. Yet, no matter how exciting the action, the

...resentation with a strong human element increases the chances of ...e dramatic action. This growth is not meant to be merely on a ...emotional de... ...r the better. An effective way to keep track of these incremental steps is with the use of a Scene Tracker. A scene tracker asks you to fulfill seven essential elements in every single scene. For our purposes here, we will focus on the two essential elements that have to do with emotion.

Character Emotional Development versus Emotional Change

1) Character Emotional Development

The #1 Essential Element on the Scene Tracker is Character Emotional Development. Every story sends a character on an outer journey (dramatic action plot line) that ends up causing the character to undergo an inner transformation (character emotional development plot line). This ultimate character transformation is shown step-by-step through their Character Emotional Development. Emotional development is cumulative, based on all of the scenes over time, and is long-term and transformative.

Emotional development implies permanent growth or long-term change or transformation in the character in reaction to the dramatic action scene-by-scene throughout the overall story. The transformation the character undergoes takes place step-by-step from the beginning and spans the entire story.

If conflict, tension and suspense drive the reader to turn the page or send the viewer to the edge of her seat, the character emotional development inspires and connects her to the story. Readers read stories and viewers go to the movies to learn about a character's emotional development. Therefore, character becomes a primary layer in the overall story.

The Character Emotional Development operates under the assumption that when a character is transformed by the dramatic action over time the story means something or, in other words, is thematically significant.

Character Emotional Development symbolizes the character's emotional transformation at the overall story level.

2) Emotional Change

Just as the dramatic action affects the overall character emotional development, the action also affects your character's emotional state at the scene level. In other words, the character's mood changes within a scene in reaction to what is said or done in that specific scene. Characters can jump from one emotion to another within a particular scene, depending on the drama, but the character's emotion must remain consistent from one scene to the next scene.

The dramatic action that takes place in each particular scene causes an emotional effect(s) on the character. The emotional reaction(s) the character experiences or emotional change(s) the character undergoes within a specific scene is often fleeting and temporary. Emotional Change symbolizes the character's emotional reactions within the scene at the scene level only.

Three Ways to Use Emotion

1) Within each scene as a response to the dramatic action in that particular scene itself

Example:

Using Rick Bragg's memoir "Ava's Man" as an example, Charlie, the grandfather of our protagonist, starts a scene angry that Jerry hurt his friend, Hootie, "just for the sport of it." The more he thinks about "how this man had come to his house, bringing the threat of violence to where his wife and children lived," the angrier and more determined Charlie becomes.

Anger consumes Charlie. When Jerry says he is coming inside the house, Charlie becomes furious (an emotional change in intensity within that particular scene itself).

2) Following each turning point or setback scene ("cause"), the character experiences an emotional reaction ("effect") or shows an emotional response (which is also an "effect")

Example:

Based on the possibility of an attack ("cause") in the previous scene, the next scene begins when Charlie shows his emotional response ("effect"): "Then Charlie did one of the bravest things I have ever heard of, a thing his children swear to. He opened the door and stepped outside to meet his enemy empty-handed, and just started walking."

3) Overall emotional developmental transformation

Not all characters undergo a transformation, but by the nature of what a protagonist embodies, that character must go through an emotional development transformation.

Example:

Charlie is not transformed based on the overall dramatic action in the story. However, the narrator, his grandson and the protagonist, does transform based on what he learns about his grandfather's life. The above scene that shows Charlie's commitment to his family and his bravery profoundly affects the narrator and leads him yet one step closer to his ultimate transformation.

In *Folly*, a stand-alone mystery by Laurie R. King, the protagonist is introduced as fragile, doubtful, exhausted, and fearful upon her arrival at the island where the story takes place.

Feeling fragile and fearful and on the edge introduces the state of the protagonist's emotional development at the beginning of the story and would be noted in the "Character Emotional Development" column on the Scene Tracker. Feeling fragile and fearful and on the edge is her state of being in her overall lifetime emotional development due to what has come before (her backstory). The ultimate transformation she undergoes in the overall story based on all she experiences through the dramatic action changes her from fragile and fearful and on the edge to strong and brave and able to fight for herself. (This is her ultimate "Character Emotional Development" for the story overall.)

The daughter and granddaughter are with the protagonist as the boat takes her to her ultimate destination. The protagonist is anxious about how her daughter and granddaughter will react to the setting where she is dropped off. The daughter is judgmental of her mother and already believes her to be crazy. The protagonist knows that her goal of rebuilding a burned-out house on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere will only strengthen her daughter's belief about her mother's lack of sanity. As the boat takes them nearer and nearer to the island, the more nervous the protagonist grows. (Each incremental rising shift in her emotional state at the scene level is her emotional "Change" within the scene itself.)

In a recent plot consultation, a writer relayed a project that was filled with dramatic action and, thus, made for an exciting story. I found myself anxious to hear what happened next, and what happened after that. The writer masterfully provided more and more compelling action, and did so seamlessly through consistent dramatic action cause and effect. In other words, one scene's dramatic action led to the next dramatic action, causing the Dramatic Action plot line to rise quickly and effectively.

Still, amid all the intrigue and mystery, suspense and fear, the characters became more and more like cardboard action figures who allowed the dramatic action to happen to them rather than characters who were emotionally affected and emotionally responding to what was happening to them. The more exciting the action, the more the characters were ignored. The less I found out about how the characters, especially the protagonist, were being affected by the dramatic action, the less I cared about the story. Without the help of the character to draw me closer, I found myself separating further and further from the story.

The dramatic action in a story helps reveal who the character is. Dramatic action revolves around goals - the character's overall story goals and the

character's goal within each particular scene. How and what the character goes after reveal their character. How they respond emotionally to successes and failures reveal their character even more.

Characters are invested in the success of their goals so when setbacks occur the reader must "see" the effects of those on the characters in their emotional reactions and responses. Dramatic action without something equal or comparable happening within the character's emotional state causes scenes to fall flat and the overall story to lose its heart.

Movies often rely on star power alone without taking the time to develop the characters in the story. Even so, the audience may feel an emotional attachment to the star. Ultimately, however, unless they emotionally identify with the main character as a character, the audience will ultimately detach from the film.

Try tracking your scenes both for the characters' step-by-step movement toward and away from their ultimate overall story transformation and for their more fleeting, temporary emotional reactions within each scene.

One writer, after having tracked her scenes on both the levels, found that her piece was "a rather dour story about a dour character." In other words, she neglected to develop her protagonist in such a way as to be emotionally affected, both short-term and long-term, by the tension within each scene. As long as this writer works on integrating a variety of emotions to show more of the protagonist's strengths and hopefulness and show more sides to her as she moves toward her ultimate transformation, this writer will ultimately flesh out the character.

Do not worry if tracking the emotional components within your story is difficult for you. Most writers have strengths and weaknesses in their writing. For instance, many writers are particularly adept at creating quirky, likable protagonists who feel emotions strongly. However, more often than not, these same writers have difficulty creating dramatic action and coming up with lots of conflict and, thus, fail at portraying the ultimate character transformation.

Other writers are just the opposite. These writers can create all sorts of amazing action scenes, but break down when it comes to developing characters who feel emotions and react and respond emotionally and who are ultimately transformed emotionally as caused by the dramatic action.

Whatever your strengths and weaknesses, be aware of them. When you are feeling brave and energetic (if, at this point you were tracking yourself in the "Change" column on the Scene Tracker template, you would receive a + for the positive emotion you were experiencing) spend time in the area that is the most challenging for you as a writer. When your energy is low (here you would receive a -), stay in your area of strength.

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Martha Alderson, aka the Plot Whisperer, is the author of the Plot Whisperer series of plot books for writers: The Plot Whisperer Book of Prompts: Easy Exercises to Get You Writing, The Plot Whisperer Workbook: Step-by-Step Exercises to Help You Create Compelling Stories – a companion workbook to The Plot Whisperer: Secrets of Story Structure Any Writer Can Master. She has also written Blockbuster Plots Pure & Simple (Illusion Press) and several ebooks on plot. As an international plot consultant for writers, Martha's clients include best-selling authors, New York editors, and Hollywood movie directors. She teaches plot workshops to novelists, mem…

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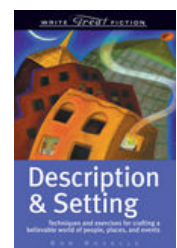

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