

Bourne toWrite...

creative writing
workshops

Character Pressure Points

by Angela Ackerman

One of the most important jobs we have as writers is to push the story forward, forcing our protagonist to act. This isn't always easy.

Characters, like people, fight change and personal growth because it makes them feel vulnerable and can be emotionally painful. The fact is, it's always easier to stay cocooned in the safety zone, to keep the status quo, avoiding change. When a character simply plods along, they don't have to make hard decisions or choices that carry risk, they don't have to go out on a limb and ACT.

The problem with doing nothing is that the character becomes stuck, never reaching out to their destiny, never truly becoming the person they were meant to be by letting go of the past and the fears that chain them.

Change is necessary for a successful character arc. Change is how our characters become stronger, more capable and confident. It's what sparks the ability to chase after their goals, find happiness and achieve satisfaction. It's how a character goes from being incomplete to whole.

When characters are being stubborn about change, it's time to pull out the big guns. Using specific **Pressure Points** we can force them to act, opening the door to inner growth. You can't hide from a pressure point, and that's the beauty of incorporating them into your story. Good or bad, a character must act and in doing so, reveal who they truly are, both to readers and to themselves.

There are many different pressure points and of course many combinations that you can use but here are four to consider.

TEMPTATION

Dangling something your character covets in front of them and then showing the inner struggle as they either accept or reject the offering is not just a way to develop the plot. Temptation will create a window into their inner strength (or weakness), shows cognitive reasoning, and reveals their values and moral beliefs. Will the character give in? Does this situation cause their moral ground to tremble? Does it show their thought process as they vacillate between giving in and staying strong? Temptation should always pressure a character and show the war going on inside them as they reach a decision.

CHALLENGES

Throwing a big challenge your character's way, especially when it comes with high stakes, can force them to think on their feet and marshal their strengths so that their best qualities rise up. Succeed or fail, how a character behaves under pressure will say a lot about who they are at their core.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Based on the outcome of a challenge, success or failure will create a second pressure point. If successful, confidence will swell and the euphoria rush often prods them to take on further challenges as they realize they were stronger and more capable than they previously believed. If they fail, it forces reflection, bringing their shortcomings and flaws to light as well as the realization that they must change or adapt in some way to see a better outcome.

REDEMPTION

This pressure point is another valuable contributor to both story and character development. Any character who fails (either themselves or others) will see stakes in a new light moving forward and the challenge becomes personal. To avoid another negative outcome, their passion and determination flares as they seek to prove that they are up to the task, and therefore worthy. This desire for achievement opens them to changing in ways that will help them tackle a problem or crisis from a place of strength.