

# Writing Activity – Developing a Compelling Antagonist

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## What exactly is an antagonist?

Typically, we think of the antagonist as the bad guy (or girl). But this is not always the case (particularly in the types of stories I write).

### The Villain

A person who is generally evil, or at least has bad intentions. Their goal is to harm or destroy the protagonist.

Darth Vader, The Joker, Voldemort, Captain Hook, Hannibal Lecter, the shark (in Jaws).

### The Conflict-Creator

Not necessarily a bad person, but their goals are in conflict with those of the protagonist. Or they inspire the protagonist to make poor choices.

*Quint* (the boat captain in Jaws) – Not a bad man, but his obsession with getting revenge on the shark cause major problems for the two other main characters.

*Fitzwilliam Darcy* (Pride and Prejudice) – not a bad person, but he does not align with Elizabeth Bennet's goals and attitudes.

*Buzz Lightyear* (Toy Story) – Not a bad toy, but he doesn't realize he is a toy, which causes problems for the protagonist (Woody)

### Inanimate Forces

The antagonist doesn't have to be a person.

#### Nature

*Castaway* or just about any other survival story.

My entire *Bridgers* series.

Also, many apocalyptic or pandemic stories.

#### The Supernatural

*The Shining* – a supernatural force working against a protagonist.

#### Technology

I use this one a lot. In my short story *Predictable*, a man tests an app that has the ability to predict everything he is going to do.

#### The Protagonist Themselves - Internal Conflict

Perhaps the most interesting of all. The protagonist must overcome his or her own flaws or characteristics.

In my short story *Really Talking*, a teenage genetically engineered Neanderthal boy is spiraling into depression because he feels that no one else can really talk to him. He finally overcomes when he meets another Neanderthal like him.

In Disney's *Up*, the old man cannot get past his grief from losing his wife. A boy scout helps him overcome this.

*Fight Club*. Explanation is probably not necessary.

# Writing a Compelling Antagonist

If you are going to have a human antagonist (or non-human in some cases), you need to make them compelling.

Your antagonist needs to be just as compelling as your protagonist!

Tips:

**1. Give your antagonist a painful backstory**

What exactly made your antagonist the way they are? A horrific, painful backstory can help readers empathize with your antagonist.

Think about the *Joker*.

In my YA novel *Rampage Ridge*, the antagonist Ruby Rhoades was bullied ruthlessly when she was young, which made her feel like prey, while everyone else was a predator.

**2. Know what your antagonist wants, and why**

Everyone is motivated by something. What drives your antagonist to do what they are doing?

In *Rampage Ridge*, Ruby is motivated by an uncontrollable desire to make everyone in the world feel what it's like to become prey. She initiates a "predator apocalypse."

**3. Make your antagonist perfect for your protagonist**

Compelling antagonists are often similar in some ways to the protagonist (Luke and Darth). Make your antagonist the one person who can push your character so hard that they reach their limit... they must change or die (remember the antagonist character arc).

In *Rampage Ridge*, Ruby Rhoades is the only person who has figured out how to turn Bobby's own power (formidable nanoparticles created by an alien civilization) against him, and against the world.

**4. Don't make your antagonist completely evil**

Compelling antagonists are three-dimensional characters, with their share of good traits.

In *Rampage Ridge*, Ruby is intelligent, creative, and curious. A meticulous planner. She is in charge of 125 followers, and she makes sure they have what they need to be comfortable.

**5. Make your antagonist believe they are the hero of the story**

In your antagonist's mind, they are doing the right thing.

In *Rampage Ridge*, Ruby believes she is resetting the world, giving it back to wild creatures and to her faithful followers.