



HOOKS THAT DON'T LET GO

Crafting Irresistible Story Concepts & Beginnings

With Erin Swann

STRONG CONCEPTS & BEGINNINGS

- Hook Readers Emotionally/Intellectually
- Establish internal logic, stakes, and momentum
- Derived from character-driven urgency, testing ideas, and crafted openings that immerse instead of explain.



OVERVIEW

Concept Testing

Problem-Focused Structure

Continuous Tension

Desire-driven Entry

1

IS YOUR STORY'S PROBLEM
THE RIGHT ONE?

The one problem that complicates everything else

External: Can the problem sustain the entire novel?

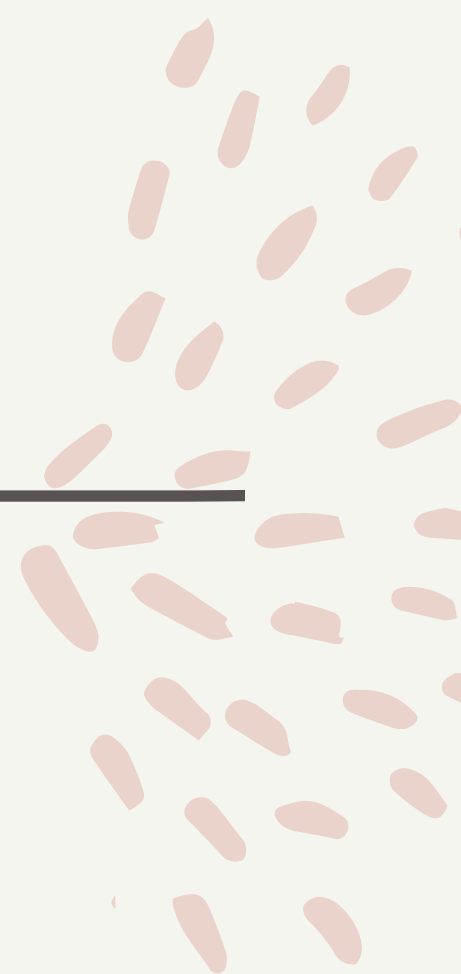
Internal: Is the Problem capable of forcing your protagonist to
make their inner change?



PROBLEM POTENTIAL

Does your concept WORK for your story, inside and out?

EXTERNAL	CAN YOUR PROBLEM BUILD?	REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES TO FACE?	CLEAR DEADLINE?
	FORCE TO CONFRONT MISBELIEF?	DOES THE CONSEQUENCE COST BIG EMOTIONALLY?	



THE HUNGER GAMES

SUZANNE COLLINS

Katniss must survive the Hunger Games (and later the rebellion) after volunteering to take her sister's place.

External:

1. Builds: Reaping --> the Games --> the victory tour --> Quarter Quell --> full rebellion.
2. Specific consequence: If she fails, she dies (or Prim dies. Loved ones and district are destroyed)
3. Ticking clock: The Games are a countdown; rebellion deadlines and threats of execution.

Internal:

4. Forces misbelief struggle: Katniss's misbelief - "Emotional connections = weakness and will get you killed." The plot repeatedly forces her to form alliances, care for and lead others.
5. Inaction cost: Walking away means certain death for herself and/or Prim + destruction of her world. She has no real choice.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

JANE AUSTEN

The Bennet sisters must secure advantageous marriages while navigating society's expectations.

External:

1. Builds: Wealthy bachelors arrive --> misunderstandings --> scandals --> family financial pressure --> proposals
2. Specific consequence: If they don't marry well, the estate goes to Mr. Collins, leaving the women destitute
3. Ticking clock: Mr. Bennet's mortality + the entailment on the estate + Lydia's scandal

Internal:

4. Forces misbelief struggle: Elizabeth's misbelief - "I can judge character perfectly and must avoid marrying for anything but the deepest love and respect." The plot forces her to confront her own pride/prejudice
5. Inaction cost: She cannot simply opt out—her family's ruin is imminent without action.

THE GREAT GATSBY

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Gatsby's quest to reunite with Daisy and reclaim the past through wealth and parties in 1920s

External:

1. Builds: Gatsby's mysterious presence --> parties --> reunion --> affair --> tragedy
2. Specific consequence: If Gatsby fails to win Daisy, his entire constructed identity and dream collapse (he loses the illusion that has defined his life).
3. Ticking clock: Tom's growing suspicion, the heat of the confrontation day, and the looming consequences of bootlegging/murder.

Internal:

4. Forces misbelief struggle: Gatsby believes "The past can be repeated and money can buy happiness/love." The plot relentlessly tests this against reality.
5. Inaction cost: Gatsby cannot walk away; his whole life is built on this obsession.

INCITING INCIDENT

The "thing" that pushes our protagonist into action.

2

COMMON PROBLEMS

- Isn't always enough motivation for a sustained story
- De-emphasizes the importance of change
- It's not personal enough
- The challenge is a single package instead of incremental

PROBLEM-FOCUSED STRUCTURE

3-Event Inciting Incident

1. Long-Standing Social Problem
2. Intimidating Opportunity
3. Unforeseen Conflict Arises

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

BY JANE AUSTEN

PROBLEM

Elizabeth faces the long-standing issue of financial insecurity. She disdains marriage for money and values independence/ judgment of character.

OPPORTUNITY

The arrival of the wealthy bachelors in the neighborhood. Elizabeth meets Darcy and interacts with new social circle.

CONFLICT

Elizabeth's immediate dislike of Darcy creates personal conflict. Darcy interferes in Jane's romance and Elizabeth hears Wickham's story—pitting her against Darcy and forcing her to confront her own prejudices.



THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS BY THOMAS HARRIS

PROBLEM

Clarice is a young FBI trainee struggling with her traumatic past and feeling like an outsider who must constantly prove herself.

OPPORTUNITY

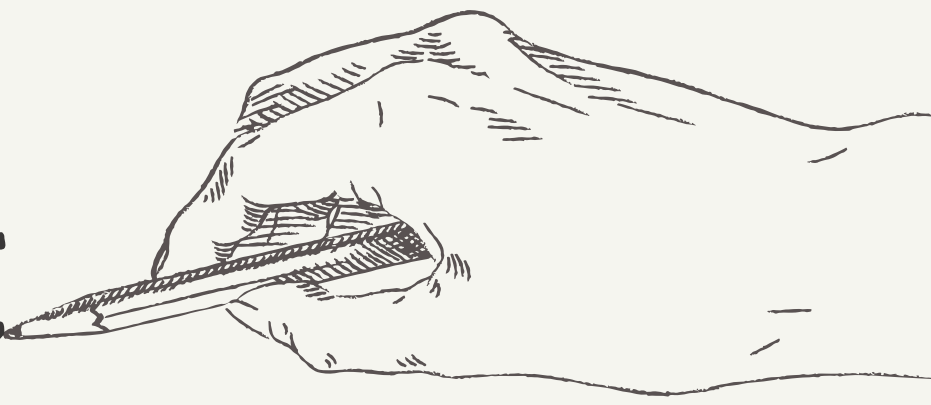
Assigned to interview Hannibal Lecter as part of a serial killer hunt, which could advance her career.

CONFLICT

Lecter's psychological manipulation creates an intellectual/emotional battle. Probes Clarice's weaknesses as Buffalo Bill claims more victims. This pits her against Lecter's mind games, institutional sexism, and her own vulnerabilities.



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD BY HARPER LEE



PROBLEM

A racially divided town and a mysterious neighbor (Boo Radley). Atticus faces moral challenges as a lawyer in this environment.

OPPORTUNITY

Atticus is appointed to defend a Black man wrongly accused of SA. Chance to stand for justice.

CONFLICT

The decision immediately creates conflict with the town's racist elements, putting the family in danger and forcing Scout to grapple with morality, empathy, and courage.

3

CONTINUOUS TENSION

TENSION = CONFLICT

- Enemies trapped together
- Experiencing a character's fear (even in small ways)
- Experiencing a character's embarrassment
- A change in relationship
- Being surprised (good or bad)

Pay attention! This matters to you!

4

CRUCIBLES

BOND PEOPLE TOGETHER THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS & ENVIRONMENT

The Best Revenge: A Novel of Broadway by Sol Stein

OPPOSITIONS
AS BUSINESS
PARTNERS

LOVELESS
MARRIAGE

FAMILY TIES
GOOD/BAD

CLOSED ENVIRONMENTS

Location where action takes place,
but not what necessarily pulls the characters together

It serves as a limitation/obstacle to add tension



DIE HARD

CLOSED ENVIRONMENT

CRUCIBLE

APOLLO 13

Trapped in a contained space with limited resources and time

ROBINSON CRUSOE

Deserted island, isolated and hard to escape

PROJECT HAIL MARY

Locked together to save their species while in a closed environment with limited resources

LOST

A deserted island frames the real crucible - the characters that are drawn to each other and the island itself

WHAT CAN I DO NOW?

Test your inner and outer conflict

Challenge your inciting incident

Look at the pressure your environment or situation cause

LOOK WITH FRESH EYES



DON'T LET THE CHALLENGE
HOLD YOUR STORY BACK



YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Hooks That Don't Let Go

Main Points

- The right story problem should complicate *everything* else
- Inciting incidents should be layered
- Readers care most when they feel they have something to learn
- Try to create tension with a crucible or closed environment

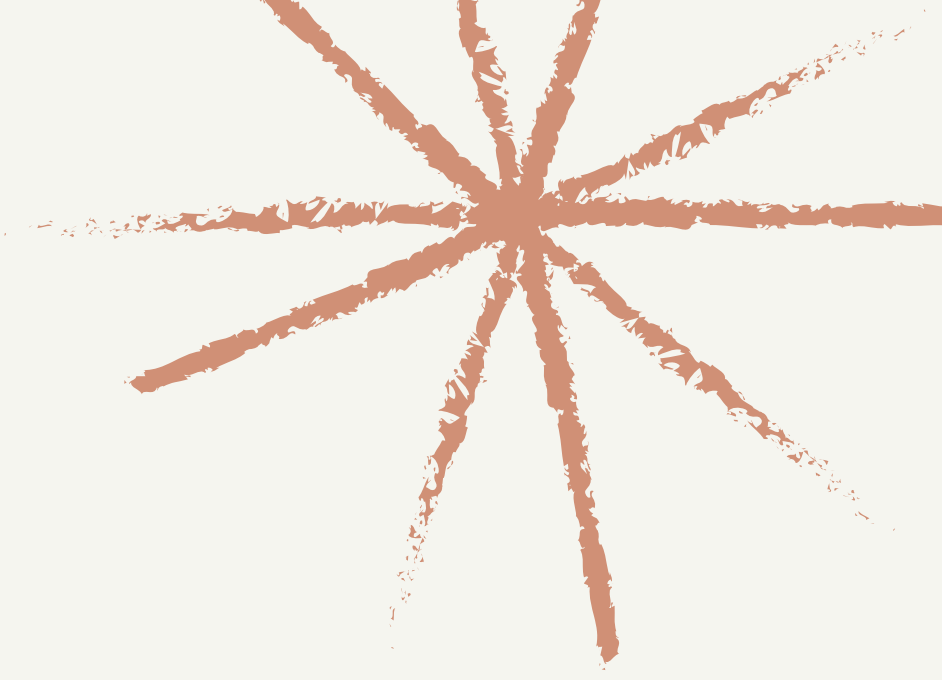
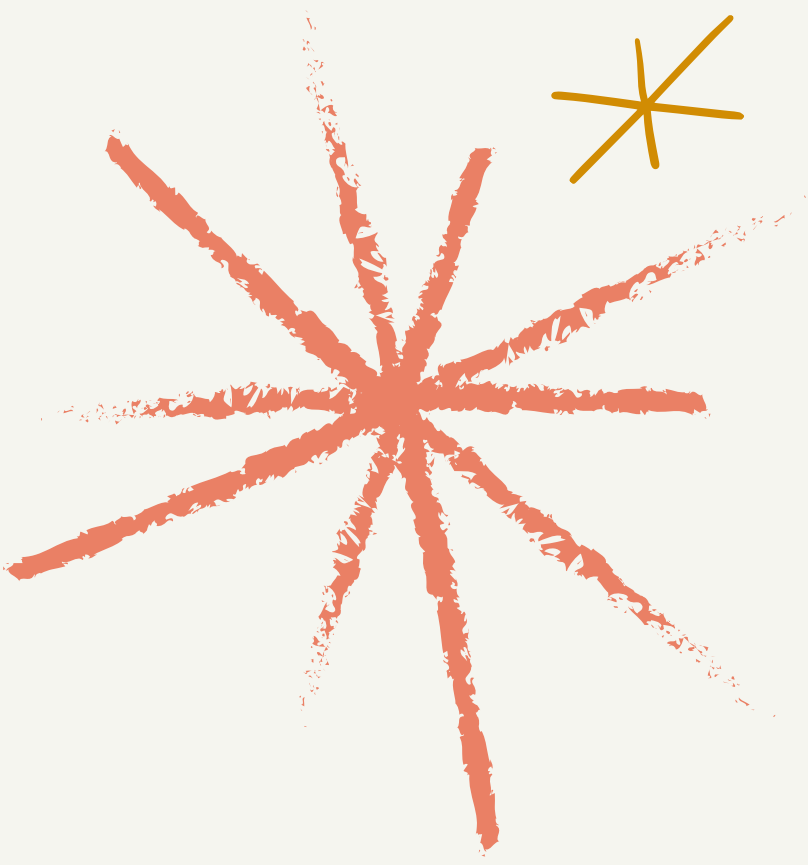


Concept Testing

- **External - Can the problem sustain the entire novel?**
 - Can your problem build? Intensify/complicate?
 - Is there a real-world consequence to this problem that will occur if my character doesn't face it or if they fail? Think specific, impending.
 - Is there a clear-cut deadline, a ticking clock counting down to the consequence?
 - Your character should not have the opportunity to just give up; to stop without a personal cost.
- **Internal - Can the problem force your protagonist to make their inner change?**
 - Will the problem's impending consequence force the character to face their misbelief (what they THINK keeps them safe, but keeps them from their goal)?
 - Whether they achieve their goal or not, will the consequence cost them something big EMOTIONALLY?

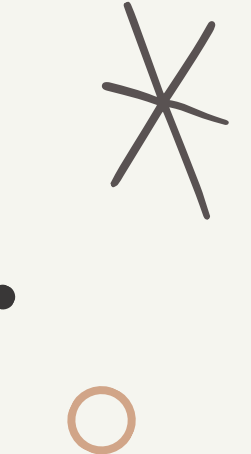
3 Event Inciting Incident

- **A Long Standing Social Problem** - The protagonist has a long-standing personal/social problem (often tied to an internal flaw they're in denial about). This is already simmering before the story begins.
- **Intimidating Opportunity** - An intimidating or tempting opportunity appears that seems to solve (or dramatically improve) that problem.
- **Unforeseen Conflict Arises** - Pursuing the opportunity immediately creates unforeseen conflict with another person (or force), raising the stakes and forcing the protagonist to engage.



THANK YOU!

REFERENCES



WRITING THE BREAKOUT NOVEL - DONALD MAASS
THE SECRETS OF STORY - MATT BIRD
STORY GENIUS - LISA CRON
ON WRITING - SOL STEIN

