

Escalator To HEA Workshop by Virna DePaul RWA 2012

Escalator To HEA

Raising Story Stakes The Easy Way

By Virna DePaul

Stakes

Stakes is not just what a character stands to lose if he doesn't get his goal.

Stakes - that which a person has to gain or lose

High Stakes Game - a game in which a person stands to gain or lose a great deal

Stakes can play a part in virtually every aspect of story.

Raising the stakes is about creating fear in the reader about what is going to happen next. This keeps the reader invested in your story.

Fear is not just based on the character losing something but also on losing some opportunity (staying the same)

Raise the stakes by magnifying what your character stands to lose or gain in EVERY stage of your story (i.e., set up/ordinary world; inciting incident, progressive complications, etc.)

Stakes are integral to three critical elements present in any type of commercial story structure:

Commercial Fiction Triad

CHARACTER (including back story, beginning arc, goal, and motivation)

CONFLICT (arcing)

ARC (completed story arc)

Beginning = Set Up = Character

Middle = Complications = Conflict

End = Resolution = Arc

Stakes in each of these areas enables a reader to feel catharsis. (The greater the stakes, the greater the catharsis.)

It all starts with your character!

Story journey for your characters:

A character with a life that needs fixing is motivated to pursue a goal (character, pre arc)

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faces progressive complications that force growth, suffers a huge loss, experiences a realization that cements the character's growth, battles his/her demons and wins (conflict and arcing)
and is better off as a result (end arc)

To accomplish all this, the character must learn that: In order to be happy, one must X. (Theme)

This is what you set up the character to learn through his story journey. It's what Martin Brody has to learn and live by at the beginning of Jaws.

THEME is the thing that STAKES rest on. What Brody stands to gain or lose during the story is all going to depend on whether he accepts the truth of your theme.

Story journey and three act structure

A character with a life that needs fixing (Stage 1, Set Up)
CHARACTER (Pre Arc)

is motivated to pursue a goal (TP 1, Oppty/ Inciting Incident; Stage 2, Progress)
CHARACTER (goal and motivation)

faces progressive complications that force growth (TP 2, First Defeat; Stage 3, Increased Complications; TP 3, Greater Set Back; Stage 4, Final Push)
CONFLICT

suffers a huge loss (TP 4, Black Moment)
CONFLICT

experiences a realization that cements the character's growth (Stage 5, Realization)
CONFLICT, ARCING

battles his/her demons and wins (TP 5, Climax)
CONFLICT, ARCING

and is better off as a result (Stage 6, Resolution)
POST ARC

What about the reader's story journey? Stakes are what make the reader CARE about your character and his journey. But in order to care and be satisfied at the end, your reader needs this:

A reader experiences catharsis if she:

wants a character to change (by knowing character's back story and ordinary world and pre arc)

understands why he left his ordinary world (goal)

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believes why he doesn't go back/why he continues to pursue his goal (motivation)

witnesses him overcome conflict enabling him to make the change she was beginning to fear would never occur (conflict, arcing)

and **celebrates** the character's transformation and HEA. (post arc)

Jaws

Jaws - what was at stake?

A man eating, woman mauling, child munching Great White shark terrorizes beachgoers off the coastline of a quaint little beach front town called Amity.

Opening image?

Next scene?

BRODY'S HOUSE (ORDINARY WORLD)

Martin Brody: How come the sun didn't use to shine in here.

Ellen Brody: We bought the house in the fall, this is summer. Somebody feed the dogs, huh?

Martin: Right.

Ellen: See the kids?

Martin: They must be in the backyard.

Ellen: In Amity, you say: yahd.

Martin: There in the yahd, not too fah from the cah. How's that?

Ellen: Like your from New York.

Michael Brody: Mom I got cut, I got bit by a vampire.

Martin: **You guys were playing on those swings. Weren't -[Phone rings] Stay off them, I haven't fixed them yet!**

Ellen: I think you're gonna live.

Martin: Hello, yeah ----what the hell do they usually do, wash up or float or what? Ah nah, nah, nah keep him there. Keep him there, I'll be out in about fifteen... fifteen, twenty minutes. All right. Okay. Gotta go, missing person. season hasn't started nobody's even here yet.

Ellen: Listen chief, be careful will ya?

Martin: In this town? --- Hey!

Ellen: David, lemme get on. I want my cup back!

Martin: You'll get it

Ellen: Okay. Wave good- bye. Bye!

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Stakes As Character (Pre Arc)

A reader experiences catharsis if she: wants a character to change. As such, give her a character she can root for, and one with a life that needs fixing

The greater the stakes, the more worthy the goal AND THE MORE THE READER WILL WANT

Theme?

Brody says to his wife, who tells him to stay safe: In this town?

That's our first clue of what is going to be a theme in the story because we know that Martin Brody is a sheriff in a town where he thinks nothing bad is going to happen.

We know he's overprotective of his kids playing on the swing set, which he needs to fix...he doesn't like to take risks, which ties into what we learn about him, that he's afraid of the water...

In order to be happy, Brody must be willing to take risks in his personal and professional life.

Brody's Pre-Arc

Things in his life need fixing:

- 1) He is afraid of the water;
- 2) He is thought of as an outsider and he is not respected by the townspeople;
- 3) His job isn't a challenge (His goal is to keep the townspeople safe, but with little risk to himself);
- 4) He is denying his demons

He is afraid to leave his ordinary world because he stands to lose:

- 1) Physical safety;
- 2) Peaceful and safe career;
- 3) Peaceful and safe place to live

What he stands to gain:

- 1) Self-respect (courage, conviction, overcoming his demons);
- 2) The self-respect of the townspeople;
- 3) A meaningful career where he is truly saving people's lives.

Note: Brody is relatively happy at the beginning. He has a loving family. What if he was a burned out drunk with no family? The stakes for his character's need to arc are higher. Think Mel Gibson in Lethal Weapon.

Shades Of Desire-Romance Example

Shades Of Desire: Natalie is a famous, globe-trotting, adventurous (some might say she's an adrenaline junkie) photographer who has lived her whole life fearing she'll lose her vision just like her mother did; she has lost almost all of it. She stays in her house, doesn't see people, isn't taking photographs or doing any other creative work. She doesn't believe any man will want her (in fact, her boyfriend dumped her

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after her latest and most serious vision loss). She secretly fears she will also inherit her mother's insanity (her mom was institutionalized after she lost her vision).

What needs fixing:

She needs to be able to leave her house and socialize with others
Still value herself as both an artist and a woman

What does Natalie stand to lose?

A rich, fulfilling life
Feeling of self-worth
Love

What does she stand to gain:

Fulfilling life
Confidence and feeling good about herself
Love

Stakes As Character (Goal)

A reader experiences catharsis if she: wants a character to change and understands why a character leaves her ordinary world. As such, give her a character with a worthy goal

The greater the stakes, the more worthy the goal AND THE MORE THE READER WILL UNDERSTAND

Jaws

How to get Brody out of his ordinary world?

It wouldn't be enough for Brody to think one day, "ah, I'm not taking enough risks or my job isn't exciting enough for me..."

In fact, most readers would think he was foolhardy if he all of a sudden did this with no good reason.

So we give him a good reason...

The shark!

The key is, as romance writers, to find out what's our shark

For a goal, you want a concrete, compelling goal that is enough to shake the protagonist out of their ordinary existence.

Shades Of Desire

What is Natalie's goal: She must help a homicide detective find a killer based on some photographs she took before she lost her vision

Does she want to? NO. Reluctant heroine.

Animal Attraction

Animal Attraction by Jill Shalvis:

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Jade works as a receptionist for small town vet Dell.

Jade's life needs fixing: she's traumatized from having been held at gunpoint 18 months ago. Manifests: she's ultra organized and in control, she never invites friends over to her house, she's emotionally distant

Her overall goal: Return to Chicago in a few weeks after being gone from her family's medical clinic for 18 months; Smaller progressive goals: stay emotionally detached; enjoy time she has left w/ animals & friends; learn how to protect herself in a physical altercation and to allow Dex to be the one to teach her; to be close with Dell and "be there" for him even though he's commitment phobic

Natalie versus Jade

Natalie's initial goal is to help cops find a killer who stole some of her photos and assaulted her twice;

These goals change and the stakes are raised. Her goal becomes to stop the killer who hurt her friend, then stop the killer who is after her.

Always keep in mind her story goals, based on what need fixing in her ordinary world: adjust to her loss of vision, learn to depend more on others, enjoy Mac even though he's commitment shy

Who has higher story stakes? Natalie. BUT it doesn't mean Jade's stakes aren't story worthy.

Stakes As Character (Motivation)

A reader experiences catharsis if she: wants a character to change, understands why he left his ordinary world, believes why he doesn't go back and continues to pursue his goal. As such, give your character a worthy motivation

The greater the stakes, the more worthy the motivation AND THE MORE THE READER WILL BELIEVE

JAWS

In Jaws, Sheriff Brody wants to stop the shark from killing anyone else. It's his job to do so. As the story goes on however, his motivation changes:

- 1) Find the woman's killer because it's his job;
- 2) Stop the shark from killing again because it's his job;
- 3) Stop the shark that killed a little kid and is still out there (he knew he should've shut down the beach but let himself be talked out of it);
- 4) Stop the shark that killed a man and almost killed HIS kid and is still out there (he knew he should've shut down the beach but let himself be talked out of it);
- 5) Kill the shark to protect townspeople and his family, but more urgently to keep who he's with on the boat safe;
- 6) Kill the shark to save himself.

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Note that as the motivations change, the stakes (what Brody has to gain or lose) escalate. What he stands to lose is not just his job/ reputation, but his family, friends, and life. [Note: if the shark had actually killed his child, the stakes for his motivation would be even more believable, wouldn't they?]

STAKES AS CONFLICT

A reader experiences catharsis if she: wants a character to change, understands why he left his ordinary world, believes why he doesn't go back and continues to pursue his goal, and witnesses him overcome conflict. As such, give him worthy conflict
The greater the stakes the more worthy the conflict and THE MORE THE READER WILL WITNESS

Conflict is what gives your reader a bird's eye view into what your character deserves and doesn't deserve...

Conflict is what forces the change upon your character so that he ultimately makes the decision to live by the truth of your theme, thus deserving happiness

Conflict is a series of progressive complications...basically, making your character miserable and trying to sway him from his goal.

Conflict tests your characters

- 1) Brody's afraid of the water and looking for an "easy" and safe law enforcement career in a small town;
- 2) Uncertainty about what killed the woman, shark or propeller;
- 3) Town council refuses to give him permission to close beaches;
- 4) Town council opens beach and says he can do nothing – (shark kills kid);
- 5) Town council opens beach for 4th of July but says he can monitor beach (shark kills a man and almost kills HIS kid);
- 6) Brody is roped into going to hunt the shark with Quinn, a crazy shark hunter;
- 7) Shark attacks and kills Quinn;
- 8) Shark attacks and might have killed shark expert;
- 9) Shark attacks Brody

Shades Of Desire

Shades Of Desire: Escalating Conflict to Natalie's goal to help Mac find the killer:

- 1) She's lost most of vision and is isolating herself at home
- 2) She's attracted to Mac, the lead detective, who she overhears calling her "needy";
- 3) Her friend flakes on driving her to the police department,
- 4) Killer tries to kidnap her,
- 5) Kissing Mac scares her, and she's forced to accept 24-hr help by female cop (who knows she's attracted to Mac)
- 6) She and Mac make love but he becomes angry because she's too willing to risk her life to prove her blindness doesn't matter
- 7) Killer tries to kill her friend
- 8) Killer tries to murder her

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Animal Attraction

Animal Attraction: Jade's motivation for goal of going back to Chicago: To prove she's healed after attack and can be the (fearless) person she used to be. Her conflicts are:

- 1) She likes her job;
- 2) She's attracted to Dell and Dell flirts with her;
- 3) An abandoned cat needs a home;
- 4) She misses closer connections and lets her friend inside her house;
- 5) She's attracted to Dell and comes to his rescue when other women hit on him (and he doesn't want to be hit on);
- 6) Her friend is encouraging her to make a move on Dell;
- 7) She's having flashback episodes and freaking out;
- 8) Dell offers to teach her self- defense moves when he figures this out, which gets them closer;
- 9) She and Dell have sex;
- 10) Dell pulls away from her because he's scared she's leaving;
- 11) Someone's attacking worker's outside vet clinics and attacks her;
- 12) She goes back to Chicago and she's unhappy.

STAKES AS ARC

A reader experiences catharsis if she: wants a character to change, understands why he left his ordinary world, believes why he doesn't go back and continues to pursue his goal, witnesses him overcome conflict enabling him to make the change she was beginning to fear would never happen, and celebrates her growth and HEA. The author's theme is proven true.

The greater the stakes, the more valuable the ARC, and THE MORE THE READER WILL CELEBRATE

How to ratchet up stakes? Make it:

Personal (a stranger is killed versus his kid is almost killed)

Escalating (one person is bitten versus someone has his arm bitten off versus someone is killed)

Imminent/urgent (a shark is out there killing, a shark is killing every day, a shark is killing every hour, a shark is attacking the boat I'm on)

Huge/Life-altering/ Ultimate (a shark is eating the fish that we sell to local restaurants, a shark is scaring people from going in the water, a shark is attacking and killing)

Believable (a shark expert says it's rare but possible for this type of shark to show up in the waters)

In Doubt (the shark expert hasn't come up for air and we don't know if he's alive or dead)