**STAKES**

**What Are They and How Do We Use Them**

**WHAT ARE STAKES?**

\*The reasons a character does or must do what she sets out to do.

\*In other words, the reasons the conflict of your story is relevant to the character you’ve

chosen.

\*Ask yourself: What is at stake for her on a personal level that makes her the only character this

story should and could be about?

**STAKES IN ACTION**

**Setting Up Your Conflict:**

\*Let’s take a detective story for an example of stakes. The inciting incident of a detective story

might be something like this: a precious artifact has been stolen from the museum. The Private

I has been hired to investigate.

\*Now, you throw in some conflict: The P.I. must solve the mystery of the stolen artifact—**but** a

nefarious gang will stop at nothing, including murder, to prevent him from finding the artifact.

And, the more the P.I. digs, the more he unearths about a political conspiracy (give some detail

on that conspiracy) attached to the artifact theft.

**Creating the Stakes**

\*Here is where your story becomes more than just a typical PI story and engages the reader.

For a lowly P.I., getting in the middle of a nefarious gang AND a political conspiracy might not

be worth it. To any rational human, it wouldn’t be.

\*Unless there is a personal reason for the PI to get involved. *These are the stakes.* Is he being

blackmailed? Does he have a personal tie to a person or plan within the gang or the conspiracy?

Tell us why he MUST solve the murder, and what is at stake for him if he doesn’t.

**DO I REALLY NEED STAKES?**

\*Yes. Stakes are the crux of your story.

\*Whether a story is literary fiction or middle grade sci-fi, without something at stake, the

reader never forms a connection with the main character’s struggle. She questions why the

protagonist you, the writer, have chosen is important.

\*If there’s nothing at stake for this character, then why bother reading at all?

**Stakes Compel Dramatic Questions**

\*Let’s go back to our PI.

\*If our he has been tasked with finding this artifact, why does he get involved?

\*Let’s speculate a former flame is involved in the robbery. The two of them have bad blood:

years ago, she gave him a false name, made him trust her, stole a valuable family heirloom from him, and left him stranded in another city, disappearing from his life entirely.

**What’s the Question?**

\*So now we know the stakes. Now, the story is asking a bigger dramatic question than just, *Will*

*He Catch the Thieves?*

\*The story is now asking: *Will He Catch the Thieves and Retrieve his Family Heirloom?*

\*The answer you give, as the writer, is based entirely on how he reacts to the stakes and the

obstacles in his way. For the PI, the Old Flame is an obstacle because she is the one in

possession of his heirloom, but also because he used to love her. This adds layers to the plot

that make it difficult to answer the Dramatic Question with certainty. It makes everything more

interesting.

**What’s at Stake?**

\*What’s at stake here is not just his heirloom, but his pride, his reputation as a PI, and the

persona he’s created in the wake of what she did.

**WHAT IS AGENCY AND WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO DO WITH STAKES?**

\*Character agency is what you get when your character is an *active character*.

\*Active=Makes Decisions. Her actions have an impact on the momentum and direction of the

plot. Without agency, or, the ability and desire to make decisions, your protagonist becomes

passive. The plot acts upon her.

**So why is this boring?**

\*Because we as readers want to see characters making decisions that *influence* how they

overcome the conflict and *answer the Dramatic Question.*

\*In other words, we want to see how a character works to achieve her goal.

**DO STAKES HAVE TO BE BIG?**

\*No. Stakes can be small, personal, psychological.

\*Let’s give our PI a new back story.

\*The PI solving the mystery of the stolen artifact might be someone whose family were all

successful, brilliant PI’s. Perhaps his mother solved the crime of the century, and ever since he’s

been working in her shadow.

\*So what’s at stake for him?

\*His family’s legacy, or, on a more personal level, his pride.

\*If he can’t solve this case, then how will ever measure up to his mother? How will ever face

her?

\*These are psychological stakes but they are stakes nonetheless. They have the ability to

warp his investigation and stop him from having a positive answer to the Dramatic Question.