LESSON 3: External GMC

A lot of writing books on character development talk about GMC (**Goal, Motivation and Conflict**). These three elements are crucial to your plot because they govern everything that happens in your story, from why your character is there in the first place to what choices they'll make along the way to "The End."

When you know your character's GMC, you can quickly figure out where the story really starts. Why? Because every story starts with a character that wants something. That something is your main character's *goal*. The rest falls in place from there.

GMC as a whole is actually divided into six parts, because you have an external element and an internal one. In this lesson we're going to concentrate on the external GMC. Lesson 4 will cover the internal part.

1. Story Goal - What your main character wants to achieve--the overall story problem that needs solving. This goal is *tangible* (not emotional).

2. Motivation - The *Why?* behind the story goal. Why is this so important to them, and why do they need it *right now*? (Think about will happen to them if they fail.)

3. Conflict - What stands in the way? There's something holding the main character back from getting to that story goal, what is it? This is often referred to as the **antagonistic force**.

Story Goal

This is, simply put, what your character **wants**. It should be **personal**, **tangible** (not nebulous like "love") and **immediate**. The character must want this now! Examples of clear, tangible story goals are things like finding a lost child, solving a murder, defeating an evil wizard. It's something your character chooses to go after in the opening of the story, and something that will result in dire consequences if they fail.

You don't want the goal to be something nebulous like "happiness." Of course everyone wants happiness, but that's not tangible. Same thing with "love." **In a romance novel, the main character's story goal is *not* to find love**. That's an emotional goal, not a tangible one. **Love is something that happens on the way to reaching for the tangible goal** (and love usually serves as a complication to obtaining the goal, part of the conflict).

For example, maybe you have a heroine whose story goal is to build the B&B of her dreams, and the hero's goal is to get the project for his failing architecture company. Along the way to reaching for those goals they fall in love and find happiness, but love and happiness were never their overall story goals. So try not to confuse the two.

It's crucial that this goal is **important to the main character**. You want it to be something that if the character doesn't get it, they will experience **dire consequences for failure**. Doesn't

necessarily mean the goal needs to be as serious as life or death, but it should *feel* that way to the main character.

Because if it's something that your main character doesn't care about, something they can live without, then why would they bother going after it? Why would they try so hard to get it? And **if the main character isn't invested in the goal, then the reader won't be either.**

So **the goal must be** *important*.

The goal should also be **urgent**. If the main character can wait a week or a year before going after this goal, then it's not that important, is it? (Or, it could be a sign your story might not be starting in the right place).

A good story goal also has actionable steps. So when you're thinking about what your character wants, think about how your character might **form a plan** to get it. Think about ways they might go about trying to achieve the goal and ways they might fail, and what they'll learn from those failures in order to pick themselves up and try again.

The main character's story goal doesn't change after a failure, but how they go about getting it does, because they're changing along the way. They're learning things about themselves and the people/world around them that they didn't know before, and it's affecting their perception of the story problem and how to solve it.

In other words, your character starts to *grow* through the challenge of reaching for the story goal.

Motivation

This is the "**Why**" behind what your character wants. And this can be a little tricky to figure out, because usually when you ask yourself why, the first thing you think of is too simple (see the previous lessons about how journaling can help you dig deeper).

So, the trick is to **keep asking why** and really get inside your character's mind to find out what's driving them to go after this goal. Many times what you discover is something that relates to a subconscious need or erroneous belief your character has (and the real reason they haven't been able to find their happily-ever-after yet), and it may not always be an honorable reason.

It's okay if your character has selfish reasons for wanting things. No one is perfect and at the start of a story, the main character is in an unsatisfying place, unfulfilled in some way. They'll be far from perfect, since the character needs to grow over the course of the story, so it's completely logical that they might be a little selfish or self-obsessed at the start. Embrace the flaws in your character as well as the good things. This is what makes them realistic and three-dimensional.

What if these flaws turn the reader against my character? Don't worry. You can balance the bad with some good. You want the reader to root for your character to succeed, even when they're still learning how to be a better person, so the key to keeping a flawed character likeable is to also show that despite the flaws, there is goodness in the character, that they're more than just

their flaws. The character might not see this in themselves early on, but you can still show it to the reader through the character's actions or in how other characters perceive them.

Conflict

This is what keeps your main character from achieving their goal and getting what they wants. You want to make this **strong**, because it needs to last the majority of the book. So it can't be something easy like a misunderstanding that a phone call or quick chat over coffee will fix.

The conflict needs to be something that will **challenge** the character in a big way and force them to deal with their emotional flaws as well. This challenge of fighting this conflict is what helps the character to grow and become a better person by the end of the story, because they can't afford to fail. And it's this constant opposition that helps build the tension in your story and gets the reader turning the pages, wondering will they succeed?

When thinking about what stands in your character's way of reaching that (tangible) story goal, consider their plan of action to get it. What steps might your character take and how might those efforts be thwarted? What might pose an obstacle?

At the same time you're thinking of **external obstacles**, such as an elusive killer, dead informant or meddling mother, start considering **emotional blocks** as well. Those will tie in with the Internal GMC, which we'll talk about in the next lesson, but they definitely can have an impact on the external goal, too, because the two are linked inside the character.

For example, a detective anxious to apprehend a serial killer (his tangible goal) may encounter obstacles such as lack of evidence, uncooperative people, or threats against his life. At the same time, he's got this emotional baggage inside himself, which affects how he's doing his job, so that's going to hinder his attempts to catch the killer, too. If he can't get his head straight, he can't be a good detective, and he'll never catch the killer, and (disaster!) someone else dies. See how it's all related?

The External GMC Chart

It's always a good idea to write down the GMC and keep it nearby as you write the novel, because these three elements remind you **what the story is about at its core**. Every scene with your main character should be related to pursuing that "want," either going after it directly, or taking stock in successes/failures along the way and making choices of what to do next.

It's important not to lose sight of the overall story goal as you write or you risk wandering off into tangents that distract from the main plot. Also remember that your character's actions and thinking will be influenced by the **"Why?"** behind the goal, the **motivation** for seeking the goal in the first place. Make sure this reason is strong, that they have a very good reason for going after this goal. The **obstacles** that your main character comes up against in various scenes will be inspired by the **conflict** you outlined in your GMC.

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The GMC Chart

Character Name:		
External GOAL	**MOTIVATION**	**External CONFLICT**
What is the character's overall story goal? (What do they want to achieve?)	Why do they want it? Why *now*?	What stands in the way?

Exercise

Fill out the GMC chart above (or create your own) with your main character's external goal, motivation and conflict.

Post your character's GMC to the loop if you'd like feedback on it.

Reading Assignment

In the book you've chosen to read during the workshop, read through the third chapter (enough of the book that you get a sense of the external story problem the main character faces and the motivation and conflict surrounding it) and fill out a GMC chart for that character.

How close to the beginning of the book was the external GMC revealed?

Save your answers to the reading assignment for the last day.