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# **Does Conflict Improve Story Dialogue?**

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### **Abstract**

While theorising on what makes a good story goes back over 1000 years, empirical research is more recent, and limited in extent. One almost universally held theory is that conflict improves stories. However, conflict is a broad and poorly conceptualised variable, and there is a dearth of empirical research into its effects on stories. Here we show that one specific form of conflict – conflictual dialogue – does not measurably improve ratings of story quality or how entertaining a story is. We used specially created stories, manipulated to create different levels of conflictual dialogue, in a repeated measures experiment. After the passage of dialogue, participants rated story quality and how entertaining they found the story. While the conflict manipulation was successful, it produced no significant difference in the rating of either quality or entertainment. However, the study may have been under-powered to find a small effect size. Despite the power issue, this study raises questions concerning whether conflict has a meaningful positive effect on the audience appreciation of conflictual dialogue, and may have wider implications for understanding the effects of conflict on stories.

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### **Does Conflict Improve Story Dialogue?**

Does conflict make for a good story?

Attempts to define what makes a good story can be traced back in the West to Aristotle and in the East to Bharata Muni, who both tried to unlock the secrets of narrative with literary and psychological analysis (Oatley, Dunbar, & Budelmann, 2018). Indeed, the study of narrative has always had a psychological component, as stories deal with thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Yet, analysis of stories only entered the psychological mainstream in the 1980s (László, 2008; Murray, 2015). In 1986, Theodore Sarbin coined the term narrative psychology, and called for qualitative research into the metaphorical value of narrative (Sarbin, 1986); while in the same year, Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1986) introduced the concept of narrative thinking (in contrast to more logical paradigmatic thinking), and encouraged empirical research into narrative. Since then, the psychology of stories has developed into a broad field, including cognitive, social, evolutionary, developmental, educational and media psychology (Isbouts & Ohler, 2013; Khan et al., 2016; Oatley et al., 2018). The psychology of stories overlaps with the fields of artificial intelligence, anthropology, neuroscience and literary analysis. These fields have produced many theories on why some stories have greater appeal to an audience, but more limited empirical research (Maslej, Mar, & Kuperman, 2019; Orton, 1996).

Within this range of theoretical perspectives, one recurrent idea is the necessity of conflict to create a good dramatic story. This idea has been expressed by cognitive, educational, and developmental psychologists (Bruner, 1986; Dimino, Taylor, & Gersten, 1995; Oatley,

1999); computer scientists (Crawford, 2003; Ryan, 1991; Ware, Young, Harrison, & Roberts, 2012), dramatists (Egri, 2009; Freytag, 1896), literary critics (Brunetiere, 1914), comparative mythologists (Campbell, 2008), drama historians (Gellrich, 1984), narratologists (Abbott, 2008; Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2010), and creative writing experts (Frey, 1987; Haven, 2014; McKee, 1999). It is therefore an anomaly that empirical research on the concept is sparse. While this dearth justifies the present research, it presents something of a difficulty in constructing an appropriate review of the literature.

In order to evaluate the limited empirical literature and place it in its context, this review is organised around three questions, which seem to be relevant to the perceived improvement in story quality potentially provided by conflict in stories:

What is a story?

What is a good story?

How might conflict make for a good story?

The thinking behind this organisation is that if conflict improves a story, this improvement might relate either to the fundamental nature of a story, or to ways of improving a story already identified in empirical literature.

**Terminology.** A problematic terminology is what to call the people in the story chain. The person who creates the story, relates the story, and receives the story.

The first two are rarely problematic but will usually be referred to as author and narrator. The latter will be referred to specifically as participants if they are part of a study; reader or viewer or listener if the discussion is media specific; and audience or audience-member when something more general is required.

## **What is a story?**

Theories of what a story is abound (see N. L. Stein and PolICASTRO (1984) for a discussion), but empirical data is limited. Much of this empirical research concerns the structure of stories, though there is also some data, both observational and experimental shedding light on what content might be expected in a story.

The quest to detect a universal story structure is not a new one, and many have set themselves the task of trying to understand how stories work (for example, Booker (2004); Frye (1957); Propp (1958)). Empirical understanding of story structure, however, derives mainly from two approaches (De Wied, 1995). The first approach consists of our knowledge about the minimal features of stories and how they fit together, most prominently in a body of research called story grammar. The second approach comes from viewing a story as a problem-solving episode, which uses people's everyday knowledge about causal relations and the sequence of actions required to achieve a goal. Some researchers referred to this kind of problem solving mental structure as a plan schema (De Wied, 1995).

**The story grammar approach to structure.** While traditional grammar describes language structures, a story grammar is a system of rules describing the underlying structural elements of a story and their temporal and causal relationship (Olson & Gee, 1988). This story grammar should relate to story schema, which is a mental framework of expectations of story structure (Mandler & Johnson, 1977). Story grammar theorises that children, through exposure to multiple stories and from life experience, internalise the typical story structures that then



provides a mental pattern, or story schema, around which to organise and understand new stories (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Olson & Gee, 1988).

There were multiple, similar, story grammars created around the same time (Lakoff, 1972; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; N.L. Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977). The most influential was the simplified story grammar developed by N.L. Stein and Glenn (1979). In the Stein and Glenn grammar, a story was divided into two parts: the Setting category plus at least one Episode. From a story grammar perspective, the Episode is the basic unit of analysis in a story, it is connected to the setting by an Allow relationship, a weak causal link. That is to say, the Setting rarely causes the Episode, but it allows it to happen. The Episode in turn can be divided into an Initiating Event and a Response. Further subdivisions leave 5 main features for the episode (see Table 1), all causally linked (N.L. Stein & Glenn, 1979).

Table 1

*Canonical Story Features Defined by N. L. Stein and Policastro (1984).*

Feature	Definition
Setting	Introduction of main characters
Initiating Event	An action or happening that sets up a problem for the story
Internal Response	The protagonist's reactions to the initiating event
Attempt	An action or plan of the protagonist
Consequence	The result of the protagonist's actions

The Initiating Event, is a problem or opportunity which significantly changes the protagonist's environment. The Initiating Event arouses a desire in the protagonist to reach a goal. The goal, included in the next feature, Internal Response, is in story grammar theory, the most critical part of the story. Much of the theorising within story grammar proposes that stories are organized around the goal of a protagonist. The primary function of the Internal Response is to motivate the protagonist into action, leading to the Attempt category. The protagonist's

Attempt is an internal plan, put into effect, with the object of reaching the goal. The Attempt leads to the Consequence, either success or failure. These five features when causally linked, are often referred to as making up the “canonical” story grammar structure (N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984). Khan et al. (2016) used exploratory factor analysis to suggest that these typical story grammar items formed a unidimensional construct.

While a story could be one solitary episode, more complex stories can be created using sequential episodes, or one episode embedded in another. Adult storytellers typically design narratives so the first episode ends with an obstacle to the goal, or a twist, which naturally leads to another episode (N.L. Stein & Albro, 1997).

These story grammar rules are, in theory, internalised schemata rather than the structure of stories that exist in texts, though the distinction is often blurred as one might expect given that the structure of the stories and the structure of schemata in theory align. However, it is still important to make this distinction because the structure of texts may not correspond to the proposed idealised internal organization of story knowledge. For example, Internal Responses and Reactions are often omitted from the text structure of stories and must be inferred to complete the story schema (N.L. Stein & Glenn, 1979).

Story grammar research showed that stories laid out according to rules of story grammar were better understood and remembered (Mandler & Goodman, 1982; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Thorndyke, 1977; Yussen, Mathews, Buss, & Kane, 1980), and that on recall people both reorder stories to fit story grammar rules (Baggett, 1979; McClure, Mason, & Barnitz, 1979; Poulsen, Kintsch, Kintsch, & Premack, 1979; N.L. Stein & Nezworski, 1978), and replace missing story grammar elements (Baggett, 1979; Whaley, 1981). This research into story grammar initially focused on the developmental trajectory of narrative skills in English-speaking

children in the United States. Story comprehension in other cultures has produced mixed results, with both results supporting the universality of story grammar (Mandler, Scribner, Cole, & DeForest, 1980), and others finding no or partial support (Invernizzi & Abouzeid, 1995; Kintsch & Greene, 1978; Yoshimura, 1996).

Turning from story comprehension to production, as they get older, children produce stories which increasingly conform to a story grammar structure according to research summarised by N.L. Stein and Albro (1997). The same structure is used for story production through adult life into old age (Cannizzaro & Coelho, 2013). Moreover, when standard story grammar research techniques are used to elicit stories from different cultures, these stories consistently show story grammar features, and in particular, participants are more likely to include the core features of the story grammar (initiating event/problem, goal, attempt, and consequence/outcome) (Abdalla, Mahfoudhi, & Alhudhainah, 2020; Maviş, Tunçer, & Gagarina, 2016; Melzi, Schick, & Bostwick, 2013; Muñoz, Gillam, Peña, & Gulley-Faehnle, 2003; Rezzonico et al., 2016; Soodla & Kikas, 2010; C. L. Stein, 2004; Willenberg, 2017).

**Comparing structural approaches.** While the macrostructural features of different story grammars (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Prince, 1973; Rumelhart, 1975; N.L. Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977) are very similar, there are subtle differences, and further research (Boyd, Blackburn, & Pennebaker, 2020; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Mandler, 1987; Pollard-Gott, McCloskey, & Todres, 1979; N.L. Stein & Albro, 1997; N.L. Stein & Kilgore, 1981; N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984) clarified the basic features that discourse needs to contain for most people to consider it a story:

- There should be at least one protagonist (N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984).

- It is necessary for this protagonist to have a problem (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984) or a goal (N.L. Stein & Albro, 1997).
- It is necessary that there is a resolution to the problem/goal (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984).
- If the protagonist is aware of the problem, and has the capability, goal-directed action towards the resolution of the problem is expected (N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984).
- Causal links: It is necessary for there to be causal links between the problem and the resolution (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a). These causal links will usually be provided by goal-directed action on the part of the animate protagonist (N.L. Stein, 1982).

Causal links are also what connects the story feature approach of story grammar to the plan schema approach to stories.

**Related approaches: Problem solving, plan schemas and goals.** While the plan schema conception of a story largely follows the story grammar story conception; it has a different model for the brain's corresponding schema. Whereas the story grammar approach assumes that in comprehending stories, people identify key features and their connections in the manner of a generative grammar; plan schema assumes people look for a problem-solving structure. More specifically, they will look for a protagonist resolving a problem through a causal sequence of events (Black & Bower, 1980).

Here the task for the reader is not to evaluate the plan of the story protagonist but rather to recognize it. Plan recognition requires bottom-up and top-down processing. The process is top-down when an overall story goal is identified early in the story. The process is bottom-up as unfolding events in the story lead to modification of the plan, or reveal a previously obscure goal (Black & Bower, 1980).

Bottom-up processing requires the person to follow a causal pathway through the story. Causal pathways are either chains which are linked by successive causes and consequences through the story (Trabasso & Sperry, 1985), or causal networks – where events are not simply connected causally to the preceding event but to any previous event in the story, often by more than one (Van den Broek & Lorch Jr, 1993). There is strong evidence that people pay particular attention to (Bloom, Fletcher, Van Den Broek, Reitz, & Shapiro, 1990) and remember (Trabasso & Van Den Broek, 1985) causal pathways in stories, and that events with multiple causal connections are judged more important (Trabasso & Sperry, 1985).

Indirect evidence of the importance of problem-solving to the structure of stories comes from the world of artificial intelligence (AI), where recognisable stories are generated using problem-solving algorithms to get from the problem to the solution in a series of causally related steps (Riedl & Young, 2010). More direct evidence comes from research by N. L. Stein and Policastro (1984) who showed that story designs with stronger causal links are more likely to be rated as stories by children and adults.

While the relative contributions of causal pathways to the conception of a story, has not been studied directly, Trabasso and Van Den Broek (1985) researched the relative contributions to story recall of story grammar features, and the two types of causal pathway they identified – causal chains, and causal networks. They found that all uniquely accounted for variance in recall, with networks and chains accounting for the majority of the variance.

**Criticism of structural approaches.** The story grammar definition of a story has been critiqued as being both too tight and too loose (Black & Bower, 1980; Black & Wilensky, 1979).

With regard to being too tight, it is easy to identify stories which do fit canonical story grammar criteria well (Black & Bower, 1980), particularly in having a goal directed protagonist

driving the story (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Klapproth, 2009; Matsuyama, 1983). Two answers have been offered to this criticism: Rather than a universal story structure, story grammar provides a useful and common story structure (Rumelhart, 1980); alternatively, stories are mentally defined as an ideal type, and each key structural element brings a narrative one step closer to the ideal (N.L. Stein, 1982). A third possibility, that story grammar/plan schema conceptualisations of the story could be further developed to include a wider range of stories has not been explored in the literature.

With regard to being too loose, it is difficult to separate stories from narratives of routine events – such as driving home from work or visiting a restaurant – simply using story grammar structure rules (Black & Wilensky, 1979; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a), (for a contrasting view on this topic see N.L. Stein (1982)), despite people finding it straightforward in practice.

**Content: Story reportability.** Differentiating stories from narratives of routine events may be assisted by certain types of story content (Black & Bower, 1980). Labov and Waletzky (1967) from their observations of everyday storytelling, came up with the concept of reportability. A reportable event, the central event in the story, is one that itself justifies the delivery of the narrative. This event is unusual, even unique, and of high importance to the narrator. Quasthoff and Nikolaus (1982), when discussing reportability, use the descriptors ‘unusual’, ‘unexpected’ and ‘interesting’ when describing reportable events, and observe that the events cannot be “trivial”. Hudson and Shapiro (1991) note that in personal narratives, the foregrounded information is what happened once, and thus it constitutes a deviation from what usually happens. Moreover, an episode is uniquely identified to a certain point of time and place (Quasthoff & Nikolaus, 1982). Reportability addresses why a story is being told.

The idea that stories are about unique events is generally accepted, though experimentally untested. However, other elements of reportability do have empirical evidence.

Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982a) manipulated the initial problem in a story from mundane to life-threatening, substantially increasing the likelihood that readers rated the narrative as a story. In a similar experiment, but this time looking at goals and importance, Jose (1988) manipulated story goal importance, to show that increased goal importance was associated with increased likelihood of the narrative being rated as a story.

**Conclusion.** The evidence seems clear that narratives constructed according to story grammar/plan schema principles are universally recognized as stories. This suggests that the structure is *a* universal. However, this cross-cultural research does not necessarily suggest that story grammar is *the* universal story form. In particular, a protagonist with a clear goal is often missing from traditional stories from other cultures, and this remains an unresolved problem. Adding the concept of reportability appears to differentiate stories from accounts of routine events.

### **What makes a good story?**

Much research into story goodness, also described by researchers as “story quality” (Schneider & Winship, 2002) builds on the features of story structure and content we reviewed in previous section on what makes a story. In addition, research suggests stories can be improved through: narrative techniques for eliciting emotion; story characters; and story absorption. Various methods have been used to measure the effect of these features on story quality.

**Other structural approaches.** Additional conceptions of structure, specifically high point and cohesion, are needed to understand the research on story quality.

High point is the major theoretical alternative to story grammar when studying the macrostructure of stories (though it also examines microstructure and content), an approach founded by Labov and Waletzky (1967). This alternative approach comes from sociolinguistics, rather than developmental and cognitive psychology, and it is focused on oral narrative production rather than comprehension. High point analysis was developed from this theory by Petersen and McCabe (1983), as a practical way of analysing discourse. High point analysis examines a narrative for six features (the canonical high point pattern).

1. An Introducer provides a summary of the narrative. It answers the questions: What is the narrative about? Why is the narrative being told?
2. Next, the Orientation outlines the setting. It answers the questions: Who is the main character? When and where did the events take place?
3. Then comes the Complicating Action, which recounts the events that build to a crisis, called the High Point.
4. The narrative is frequently halted at this High Point while its importance is highlighted by an Evaluation of the action.
5. Following the High Point, the Resolution relates the resolution of the crisis.
6. Finally, the narrative ends with the Coda which wraps the story up, including any lesson learned.

There are obvious similarities to story grammar: temporal sequencing, often with goal directed behaviour, and certain structural features (orientation, complicating action, and resolution). Different features include the emphasis on evaluation by the narrator, and the building of the story to a high point/climax. Research suggests that these different features in



high point story structure are probably not necessary for a narrative to be considered a story (N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984).

In order to construct a story, microstructure as well as macrostructure must be mastered (Shapiro & Hudson, 1991). While the Labov and Waletzky (1967) analysis of narrative placed emphasis on the causal microstructure, microstructure in narrative is most associated with the work of Halliday and Hasan (1976), who introduced the term cohesion when discussing microstructure, in contrast to what they labelled coherence in macrostructure. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976) cohesion is formed by grammatical and lexical linking within a text that holds a text together and gives it meaning.

**Structure and story quality.** Story designs with canonical story grammar features and stronger causal links are more likely to be rated as good stories by children and adults (N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984).

Comparing structural approaches, A. McCabe and Peterson (1984) investigated the notion of story quality by asking expert raters to analyse personal narratives for elements of story grammar, high point, and microstructure; and then asked lay adults to rate the quality of the same narratives. The researchers concluded all three structural approaches contributed in different ways to positive quality ratings, and that the more complex a story was from a story grammar perspective (having embedded and causally linked episodic structures within other episodes), the more likely they were to be judged good narratives. Pratt and Robins (1991) performed a similar study, but without measuring microstructure. Again, lay judges rated more highly stories with canonical high point and story grammar structures, with greater complexity of story grammar structure also leading to higher story rating.

Schneider and Winship (2002), asked participants to read sets of stories, each set constructed to vary on a single-story aspect: cohesion, story grammar elements, or connections (none, temporal, causal). Readers then ranked the stories in each set from best to worst. Results indicated that readers generally rated highly story featuring story grammar features, causal connections, and adequate levels of cohesion. More sophisticated levels of cohesion seemed to make no difference.

**Content and story quality.** Story liking seems to correlate with story content that is reportable (see previous section) – that is to say important and unusual – while entertaining stories have content that includes exaggeration, emotions, and personal evaluations.

Jose (1988) manipulated story goal importance, to show that increased goal importance increased how much participants liked a story. Goal attainment difficulty was also manipulated and shown to increase story liking, though not to the same extent as goal importance. Baron and Bluck (2009) found that autobiographical stories identified by the narrator as meaningful, were given higher quality ratings by lay raters. Allyssa McCabe and Peterson (1990) examined what content made a story memorable (a potential dimension of story quality, see below), hypothesizing sensational content would be most memorable. Despite somewhat loosely defining “sensational content” – content that was exciting and emotionally powerful – they achieved 97% agreement in classifying which stories were sensational. As predicted, the sensational stories were rated by participants as most memorable.

Experimental research into every day storytelling indicates that when people are trying to entertain (again, a potential dimension of story quality) they decrease details, while adding exaggeration, emotion, and personal evaluations. Stories changed in this way are less accurate,

but evaluated as more entertaining (Burrus, Kruger, & Jurgens, 2006; Cole, 2014; Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, 2004).

**Emotional response: Suspense, surprise, and mystery.** Higher ratings of story quality are given to stories that produce certain emotional responses in their audience – in particular suspense, surprise and curiosity.

Brewer's influential structural affect theory (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982b) postulated a key feature of stories was that through the manipulation of story structure they generated emotions. In the Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982a) model of suspense, in order to evoke suspense, a story has an initiating problem followed by a series of events unfolding in a linear causal way to reach a solution. The initiating event, usually presented early in the story, indicates significant consequences for the character(s) in the future (positive or negative), and so generates suspense in the reader. This in turn would lead to audience enjoyment.

Equally influential when discussing suspense is Zillman's affective dispositional theory (ADT) of suspense (Zillmann, 1996). In this theory, the reader has to like a character and hope that they come to no harm in order to feel suspense.

Most research on suspense is an examination of elements of these two theories.

Research confirms that both a linear structure generates suspense (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988; Knobloch, Patzig, Mende, & Hastall, 2004) and more suspense is experienced when the main character is liked (Brookes, 2013; Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006). When a liked character has a good outcome this is associated with more suspense and enjoyment (Alwitt, 2002; Kaspar, Zimmermann, & Wilbers, 2016; Madrigal, Bee, Chen, & LaBarge, 2011). More generally, studies have linked suspense with enjoyment (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Kaspar

et al., 2016; Knobloch et al., 2004; Madrigal et al., 2011) and interestingness (Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001). However, no research has linked suspense with overall assessment of story quality.

Surprise on the other hand, according to Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982a), happens when one or more events are missing from the unfolding story. In other words, the story skips past events which are crucial for a true understanding the causal pathway, and the same events when revealed explain the surprise and complete the causal pathway (Maguire, Costello, & Keane, 2006; Maguire, Maguire, & Keane, 2011). Surprise story endings are more interesting and enjoyable than low-surprise story endings, but only if the surprise is congruent with the rest of the story, that is to say it completes the causal chain (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Hoeken & van Vliet, 2000; Iran-Nejad, 1987; Kim, 1999).

Curiosity and interest are members of a group of emotions associated with learning (Silvia, 2017). While they are not specific to stories (Ainley, 2017), a good story might be expected to arouse curiosity and interest. Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982a) postulated that curiosity is produced by having a storyline which, rather than unfolding from initiating event to resolution, starts instead from an event from later in the causal chain, for example a crime is discovered. Following this, events prior to the crime are slowly revealed, as the mystery plot develops, and the story ends with the identification of the culprit. In a sense, part of the story is told backwards, through the causal pathway, to the initiating event. This in turn leads to reader enjoyment (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a). Investigations have confirmed the postulated effects of this structure on curiosity, and enjoyment (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988; Hoeken & van Vliet, 2000; Knobloch-Westerwick & Keplinger, 2006; Knobloch et al., 2004).

So, creating suspense, surprise, and curiosity is likely to produce an enjoyable and interesting story. However, no research has linked producing these emotions with overall assessments of story quality.

**Character.** Audience reaction to character -- liking, identification and perceived similarity -- also predicts ratings of story liking and enjoyment.

At the intersection of structure and character, the affective disposition theory (ADT) of drama (Zillman & Cantor, 1977) addresses why people enjoy dramatic stories. This enjoyment is thought to depend on the success or failure of characters in a story. Depending on the extent people like or dislike a character (their disposition towards the character), enjoyment increases as positive outcomes are experienced by liked characters and/or negative outcomes are experienced by disliked characters. Conversely, dysphoria is experienced as negative outcomes are experienced by liked characters and/or positive outcomes are experienced by disliked characters. When explaining how an audience decides which characters they like or dislike, ADT emphasises moral factors: that is, a character's good or bad behaviour and the motivations behind these behaviours drives like/dislike by the audience (Raney, 2002). Research support for disposition-based theories of drama have been shown (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillman & Cantor, 1977; Zillmann, 2000).

Identification refers to a mental process whereby a person hearing or viewing a narrative imagines him or herself as a story character. The person loses self-awareness and takes on the feelings, perspectives, and goals of that character (J. Cohen, 2001). Identification has been shown in some research to increase story enjoyment (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Jose & Brewer, 1984) but not others (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010).

Perceived similarity to a character is an audience's judgment about the extent to which they and a character share common attributes, characteristics, beliefs, and/or values with a character (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Similarity may also lead to story liking via increasing character identification (Jose & Brewer, 1984).

**Transportation.** Transportation (Melanie C. Green & Brock, 2000), is the most prominent of several similar theories which describe an individual's degree of absorption into a narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Jacobs, 2015; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Transportation is a process in which a story world is created through mental images; attention is directed from the real world to this story world, and feelings may be aroused by events in the story world despite these events having no basis in reality (Melanie C. Green & Brock, 2000).

Measures of transportation and enjoyment are reported to be correlated in unpublished (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2006; Melanie C Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004), and published research (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). However, factors leading to greater transportation are the same elements previously discussed as increasing story appreciation -- a strong causal chain (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009); suspense (de Graaf & Hustinx, 2011; Johnson & Rosenbaum, 2015; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), positive valence ending (Banerjee & Greene, 2012), sympathetic protagonist (de Graaf & Hustinx, 2015) – and it may well be that transportation is an effect of story quality rather than a cause.

**Evaluating story quality.** A crucial issue for this study is how story quality can be measured: Whatever the particular benefits conflict might confer on a story, the assumption of this study is that these in turn should contribute to a measurable change in evaluation of story quality.

Built into story quality research is the idea that people have an implicit idea of what constitutes a good story and use this when asked to make a judgement (Baron & Bluck, 2011). This is sometimes called an aesthetic judgement (Schindler et al., 2017). Yet the literature suggests potential difficulties with knowing what aspects of judgement to measure and how to measure them. The research reviewed uses both global measures of stories such as story quality or story liking, or what seem likely to be subcomponents such as enjoyment, without clarifying how they relate to one another. Moreover, aesthetic judgments are intertwined with emotional and cognitive responses to a story, and so hard to differentiate from these. For example, there is the subtle difference between, having watched a film, saying “the story was exciting”, reporting the experience; and saying “the story is exciting”, an evaluation.

Ways to measure this aesthetic judgement include: simply asking people how much they like a story (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982a; Jose, 1988; Orton, 1996); asking people to rate how ‘good’ a story is (Kemper, Rash, Kynette, & Norman, 1990; A. McCabe & Peterson, 1984; Pratt & Robins, 1991; N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984), and asking people to rank stories from best to worst (Christensen, Wright, Ross, Katz, & Capilouto, 2009; Schneider & Winship, 2002).

Yet story quality and goodness are vague abstractions, and single item scales are vulnerable to reliability and validity problems (Sarstedt & Wilczynski, 2009). Baron and Bluck (2011), attempted to create a more robust conception and measure of story quality, by using exploratory factor analyses of a pool of statements derived from focus groups. They identified six dimensions of the construct “story quality”: A good story is one which is rich in imagery, memorable, emotional, original, engaging, and entertaining. These six dimensions showed good or excellent (according to the criteria of Cicchetti (1994)) intraclass correlations across a wide age range, and with stories that were fictional and autobiographical. Validity, however, was not

examined, nor has this research been replicated. Moreover, the dimensions are eclectic, including evaluations of content, and emotional/cognitive evaluations.

Identifying underlying emotional and cognitive responses to a story in order to measure them is also not straightforward. Firstly, there are definitional difficulties: emotions lack sharp boundaries (Fehr & Russell, 1984); and the words and phrases of natural languages, such as “exciting” or “interesting” comprise an uncertain basis for identifying valid psychological constructs (Fiske, 2020). Secondly, the impact of stories, and other forms of media content, on cognitive and emotional variables is either highly variable, or if consistent, produces small to moderate effect sizes (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Thirdly, we are discussing a wide range of potential aesthetic cognitions and emotions (Schindler et al., 2017).

To illustrate this breadth, and tease out the link between judgment and cognitive/emotional response, let us turn to a media psychology study carried out by Bartsch (2012), while developing the Emotional Gratification Scale. In this she created a pool of statements from qualitative interviews asking about gratifying emotional reactions to movie stories; and then used exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to derive a set of seven factors capturing these reactions: the first three factors are more purely emotionally rewarding; 1) fun, 2) thrill, 3) empathic sadness, while the latter four reflect broader social and cognitive rewards; 4) contemplative emotional experiences, 5) emotional engagement with characters, 6) social sharing of emotions, and 7) vicarious release of emotions. Vicarious release of emotions was not correlated with emotions associated with conflict such as anger, rather this factor was related to emotions such as sadness, fear, and poignancy (Bartsch, 2012). These seven factors were tested using film and television stories. All seven emotional/cognitive factors predicted participants’ agreement with the evaluation “The movie was really good.” Character



engagement, contemplativeness, and social sharing of emotions predicted agreement with the evaluation “I found the movie artistically valuable.” Thrill, fun and character engagement predicted agreement with the evaluation “The movie was entertaining.” Lastly, character engagement, contemplativeness, social sharing and vicarious release of emotions predicted agreement with the evaluation “The movie left me with a lasting impression.”(Bartsch, 2012).

Once again using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, but taking a broader perspective, Schindler et al. (2017), searched the academic literature for what might be reactions to a whole range of aesthetic experiences, including negative experiences. One of the more interesting findings from this research, was that negative emotions, including boredom, appear to form a separate construct – they were not just the absence of something positive.

Limitations associated with self-report measures – social desirability bias, overly subtle responses—potentially can be overcome by including physiological measures of responses to media (Ravaja, 2004), and there is some limited research in this area with regard to measuring the response to stories. J. A. Barraza, Alexander, Beavin, Terris, and Zak (2015) showed autonomic changes (heart rate, and some measures of electrodermal activity) but not adrenocorticotropin hormone (ACTH) levels, predict the persuasiveness of an emotional narrative. In a similar study (using the same story) oxytocin release (proposed to suggest empathic feelings) predicted persuasiveness (J. Barraza & Zak, 2009). Dunbar et al. (2016) showed that watching an emotionally arousing story in a movie, increased participants pain threshold, indirectly suggesting a response in the endorphin system.

**Conclusion.** The same features of structure and content that define what a story is, appear to also lead to higher ratings of story quality. Moving beyond this there is a body of empirical research on narrative techniques for eliciting emotion; character; and transportation, to improve

the story, though more often this research measures story enjoyment rather than story quality. Various methods have been devised to measure the effect of these features on perceived story quality and other variables indicating a positive audience response to a story, though the variables measured sometimes do not seem to be conceptualised clearly, and the measures often lack adequate psychometric evaluation.

### **Conflict in Stories**

This section reviews the concept of conflict in stories; psychological theories and evidence relevant to conflict in stories; and potential ways of measuring the effect of conflict on stories.

While conflict appears to be a property of narratives found across different cultures (Hogan, 1997), the modern Western consensus that conflict is a necessary ingredient for a good dramatic story probably derives from Georg Hegel (Gellrich, 1984; Lawson, 1949). Hegel applied his dialectic approach to tragedy (stories involving human suffering, in contrast to comedies). His idea that “contradiction is the power that moves things” (Bukharin, 2013, p. 75) led him to the idea that *tragic collision*, the clash between the will of the story protagonist and opposing forces, propelled a story forward through producing dramatic action (Hegel, 1998; Lawson, 1949).

Other theorists followed Hegel in emphasising the dialectic: a protagonist with a goal, a drive, or intention; and forces, obstacles and problems in opposition to that goal (Bruner, 1986; Dimino et al., 1995; Egri, 2009; Hegel, 1998; McKee, 1999; S. Stein, 1995). The obstacles can be internal, involve other people, or involve some wider aspect of the world (Brunetiere, 1914;

Lawson, 1949; McKee, 2016). Most theorists also follow Hegel in stressing the importance of careful plotting to create the tragic collision between protagonist goal and obstacles to produce what is variously described as drama (Brunetiere, 1914), action (Egri, 2009), and conflict (McKee, 1999); what the audience witnesses moment by moment, as the protagonist struggles on the page, stage and screen.

Here we can discern three elements used by an author in generating conflict: creating a potential conflict by fashioning both a character with a goal and obstacles to that goal; precipitating this conflict using plotting to bring the goal and obstacles together; and showing the ensuing drama. To illustrate these distinctions, in the film *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977), the character Luke Skywalker has the goal of defeating the Empire, while standing in his way are Darth Vader and the Death Star – this is the first element. In the climactic scene of the film the plot brings Luke to attack the Death Star, while placing Darth Vader in his way – this is the second element. Then the audience sees on screen the conflict as Luke tries to destroy the Death Star while Darth Vader tries to destroy him – the third element. In this review we combine the first two elements under the heading ‘structural conflict’; while the third element will be referred to as ‘dramatic conflict’.

Structural conflict and dramatic conflict are rarely explicitly separated in the literature when referring to conflict, and readers have to make their own judgement which are being discussed. Yet, they can be separated in stories. For example, in Shakespeare’s play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the two protagonists have a goal of defeating the forces of Octavius’; the plot brings the opposing navies together; yet these vital naval battles, the tragic collisions, are kept off stage (McJannet, 1993), presumably for practical reasons, and so we have structural conflict

but no dramatic conflict. This distinction between structural conflict and dramatic conflict tends to break down in short, simple stories.

Structural conflict does not guarantee dramatic conflict, it only *allows* that dramatic conflict could happen (Ware, 2011). When people with different goals meet, there is no compulsion they get into dramatic conflict. Dramatic conflict can be avoided in three ways. Firstly, the protagonist may try and avoid or escape the conflict and come at their goal another way. Secondly, the antagonist may avoid the conflict. Thirdly, a workable compromise can be reached. However, all these potentially functional approaches are not what dramatic stories appear to require. The two forces must meet, compete, struggle, and one force, however temporarily, emerge the winner. This is dramatic conflict.

To illustrate this point, consider the story from the legends of Robin Hood (Pyle, 1883), where Robin meets Littlejohn on a narrow bridge, and as neither is willing to cede passage, they come to blows. In this case, if either yielded there would be no dramatic conflict; nor would there be dramatic conflict if they negotiated another solution such as tossing a coin to decide precedence. Neither of these, however, would be much of a story – and so they fight.

So there must be struggle (Ware, 2011). A protagonist who struggles is one element that binds together internal conflict, conflict with others, and conflict with the wider environment (Gellrich, 1984). This presents a potential problem, in that characters are expected to act believably (Bates, 1994), therefore forcing characters to go out of their way to find conflict may violate audience expectations. In creative writing this issue is addressed by the notion of a “crucible” (Frey, 1987; S. Stein, 1995). In life a crucible is a container where metals are heated to a very high temperature. The story crucible is some aspect of the setting or plot or character which holds together conflicting elements forcing them to interact and generate ‘heat’. For

example, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* the protagonists' love is the crucible that brings them and holds them together, even though this unleashes structural conflict and dramatic conflict as their families clash.

Conflict varies in intensity. From reviewing the literature, Ware (2011) identified four dimensions that predict the intensity of conflict: how closely matched are the two sides to a conflict; how 'close' are conflict participants (geographically, and in their relationship to each other, for example being married); how high the stakes are in the conflict; and how will the resolution of the conflict leave the participants. Ware et al. (2012) then created metrics to measure each intensifier, and showed that researchers rating simple stories using these metrics produce similar results to lay raters who simply had descriptions of the four metrics.

Moving from the question of whether conflict improves a story to why any improvement might be, we enter an area which is not given a lot of attention in the literature. As previously noted Hegel (to use our terminology) believed that the value of structural conflict was in the creation of dramatic conflict (Hegel, 1842, 1998); McKee (1999) suggested the benefit of dramatic conflict was that it revealed character; while, as discussed further below, media psychology researchers make a link between conflict and the generation of suspense (Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000).

**Adversarial dialogue.** One place where dramatic conflict could be studied is adversarial dialogue. As we narrow focus from the broad area of story design to the narrower practical task of creating dialogue, the range of theorists also narrows, so that the literature on dialogue creation is dominated by dramatists and creative writing experts. According to these experts, dialogue is an ideal medium to display conflict (Egri, 2009), and dialogue can be improved by making it conflictual (Axelrod, 2013; Bell, 2014; Frey, 2010; Hough, 2015; S. Stein, 1995).

Every passage of dialogue cannot be a manifestation of the clash between story goal and obstacles, and dialogue is often used for other purposes, such as exposition or to reveal character (Hough, 2015). Therefore, adversarial dialogue must frequently be created in part through providing a specific reason for characters to be in conflict. Reasons for conflict may directly reflect the clash of story goals and obstacles; but other reasons are common, such as the desire for social precedence, or by giving characters different attitudes to life (S. Stein, 2014). The other key element in creating adversarial dialogue is showing the dramatic conflict through the content of the dialogue and its accompanying descriptors and body language (what is said, and how it is said). Specific elements in adversarial dialogue are sometimes listed: “Your characters can: threaten, tease, argue, wheedle, cajole, insist, taunt, demand, interrupt, lie” (Patterson, 2013).

For example, the reader knows that Raymond Chandler’s private detective, Philip Marlowe, has an antagonistic attitude towards those with high status or authority, and this provides both the reason for adversarial dialogue, and reader expectation for adversarial dialogue whenever Marlowe meets a crime boss, a police chief, or a wealthy client (Bell, 2011). However, the dialogue speaks for itself. In this example, a rich client requests that Marlowe accompany him to a rendezvous, but refuses to say why. Marlowe says:

“You just want me to go along and hold your hat?”

His hands jerked again and some ash fell off on his white cuff. He shook it off and stared down at the place where it had been.

“I’m afraid I don’t like your manner,” he said, using the edge of his voice.

“I’ve had complaints about it,” I said. “But nothing seems to do any good.” (Chandler, 2010, p. 52)

Here we detect conflict in the words, for example the sarcasm in the opening statement; in the body language, as the client's hands jerk in response; and in the description of how words are delivered using "the edge of his voice".

The general principles for intensifying conflict (Ware et al., 2012) can also be applied to dialogue, including: making the protagonist and antagonist closely matched, making the conflict face-to-face, and making the characters have a close interpersonal bond.

**The Evidence.** How does the research previously reviewed on what defines a story and what makes a good story tell us about conflict in stories?

Is conflict necessary for a story? Research gives no indication that structural conflict or dramatic conflict is necessary for a narrative to be considered a story. A protagonist can be presented with an important problem, form a goal, and, through a series of causally linked actions and events, achieve it without encountering obstacles and without having to struggle—and this would be recognised as a story. For example, here is a narrative designed to illustrate this point from research by N. L. Stein and Policastro (1984), which the majority of study participants identified as a story:

One day Alice was playing in the sand when the tide came in very fast. Suddenly the waves came on the shore, drenching Alice and her beach clothes. Alice got very scared, so she gathered up her things and was able to escape from the face of the waves. Alice was relieved and happy. (N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984, p. 138).

Though, judged by the mean ratings of story quality, this was not considered a good story.

Does conflict improve story quality? The research we have already reviewed on story quality has a limited bearing on this question.

Story grammar research shows that adult storytellers typically structure narratives so the first episode ends with an obstacle to the goal, or a twist, which naturally leads to another episode (N.L. Stein & Albro, 1997), moreover adults rate these more complex stories as higher in quality (A. McCabe & Peterson, 1984; Pratt & Robins, 1991; N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984), and it is in these twists and obstacles that we see structural conflict and dramatic conflict being added to the story. Similarly, higher quality ratings are given to stories which follow canonical highpoint structure (A. McCabe & Peterson, 1984; Pratt & Robins, 1991), including the build up to a climax, something which is difficult to conceive without structural or dramatic conflict. More theoretically, as an audience pays particular attention to events on the causal pathway through a story (Trabasso & Van Den Broek, 1985), then an event on the pathway in which the protagonists goal meets an obstacle would seem particularly likely to garner attention, as a potential turning point in the causal pathway (Doust, 2015).

In research which ties conflict both to the causal pathway, and suspense – a mechanism which might explain how conflict could lead to audience enjoyment – Doust (2015) shows audiences feel increasing suspense as they perceive a story approach a conflict which could alter the direction of the causal pathway. Moreover, by conceptualising conflictual events as key points on the causal pathway, it is possible to see how, in addition to suspense, conflict might elicit surprise and curiosity in ways suggested by the structural affect theory. Other researchers have theorized on the importance of conflict for suspense (Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000), and much suspense research uses structural conflict or dramatic conflict to create suspense (Comisky & Bryant, 1982; Gerrig & Bernardo, 1994; Madrigal et al., 2011; Vorderer & Knobloch, 2000; Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975). Indeed, among viewers there is a strong association between plots that involves conflict and those that are suspenseful (Alwitt, 2002). Yet we lack



experimental evidence showing increasing levels of conflict increase suspense which increases story enjoyment.

Similarly, the affective disposition theory (ADT) of drama (Zillman & Cantor, 1977) provides a credible mechanism for the effect of conflict but without empirical evidence. The resolution of structural conflict in a story in favour of a liked character (and against a disliked character) is likely to lead to enjoyment of a story. Moreover, as conflict is likely to reveal appealing character traits (courage, resourcefulness, et cetera), and unappealing ones (cowardice, vindictiveness, et cetera) (McKee, 1999), it seems likely to increase the effect of ADT. ADT has also been applied to humour (Zillmann, 2000), and it is here that it appears to most closely resemble dramatic conflict. Humour often deals with moment-to-moment conflict and its resolution. ADT holds that much humour enjoyment follows the same pattern as for drama – it depends on the disposition of the audience towards a character and the fate of the character. Putdowns are enjoyed if directed by a liked character at a disliked character, but not the other way round (Zillman & Cantor, 1977). A number of experiments provide support for the disposition theory of humour (for a review see Zillmann (2000)). These experiments sometimes use short pieces of dialogue where insults are exchanged in a manner identical to conflictual dialogue (Wicker, Barron, & Willis, 1980; Zillmann & Cantor, 1972), indicating that part of the appeal of conflictual dialogue might be derived from the landing of humorous insults by a liked character on a disliked character; but it also suggests ADT might apply more generally to conflictual dialogue with enjoyment coming from a liked character “winning” the exchange.

When we turn to specific research on the issue of whether conflict increases story quality, the seeming universal agreement on the importance of conflict contrasts with the sparse empirical literature on the subject (Ware, 2011); including research into the creation of conflict.

Indeed, only one study was identified, drawn from research into people's response to violence on television and films. Diener and Woody (1981) studied audience appreciation of different content within television adventure stories: violence, action, and interpersonal conflict. In this research, the audience disliked violence; was neutral to action, and enjoyed interpersonal conflict. However, given that violence, action, and interpersonal conflict are all potentially manifestations of structural and dramatic conflict it is hard to interpret this as evidence that conflict improves story quality.

Of course, audience appreciation of conflict in stories, may reflect a more general conflict liking of viewing conflict. More specifically, do we enjoy watching somebody struggle to overcome an obstacle or opposing force?

Violence in the media is a heavily researched concept, which would appear to potentially overlap with ideas of interpersonal conflict – it is common to see it in the media portrayed as a struggle against opposition. Violence is commonly thought of as a physical phenomenon, however, violence can be defined more broadly as “any action that serves to diminish in some physical, social, or emotional manner [...], including verbal forms of aggression, not just physical forms” (Potter & Potter, 1999); and verbal violence specifically, has been defined as “noxious symbolic messages containing criticism, insults, cursing, or a negative affective reaction” (Greenberg & Downing, 1981). This list appears to indicate that verbal violence contains much similar content to the verbal exchanges typical of conflict in story dialogue (Patterson, 2013). Research into positive audience response to violence has tended to focus on enjoyment. However, somewhat counterintuitively, the literature has largely failed to show an increase in audience enjoyment with violence, though violent content in all types of media tends

to increase viewing (Weaver, 2011); a finding which also applies to verbal violence in reality television shows (Stanca, Gui, & Gallucci, 2013).

Competition is another concept which would seem to overlap with conflict; and so one potential driver of enjoyment of viewing conflict is enjoyment of competition. Enjoyment of competition has been studied in the area of sports teams. In particular the uncertainty of outcome hypothesis which assumes that fans derive greater enjoyment and satisfaction from observing contests with an unpredictable outcome, and therefore the less certain any game's outcome is the larger the game's attendance will be. Some correlation research supports this idea (Levin & McDonald, 2009; Meehan Jr, Nelson, & Richardson, 2007; Schmidt & Berri, 2001; Soebbing, 2008). Sports competition in certain circumstances can turn into a rivalry which appears to enhance viewer enjoyment (Tyler & Cobbs, 2015), indeed, (Bryant, 1982) showed that even the perception of rivalry induced by deliberately slanted commentary which presented opponents as bitter rivals was significantly more enjoyable for fans. There are a number of theories concerning why humans should be interested in watching other people competing, with some correlational evidence that status is what is at stake in competitions, so observing the competition gives information about relative status, potential allies and rivals (Apostolou & Lambrianou, 2017).

**Measuring conflict and its effects.** When theorists look for structural conflict, this is part of an expert evaluation of how well-crafted the story is. This goodness is described as “story quality” by story grammar theorists (Schneider & Winship, 2002), though here, story quality is a construct potentially evaluated by expert or non-expert raters (Baron & Bluck, 2011; A. McCabe & Peterson, 1984; Schneider & Winship, 2002). Narrowing down to conflictual dialogue, the emphasis in the theoretical literature is less on global story quality and more on whether the

dialogue is interesting and entertaining, or boring (Axelrod, 2013; Bell, 2014; Frey, 2010; Hough, 2015; S. Stein, 1995). These might either be aesthetic judgements or emotional responses. So, theoretically, structural conflict is expected to improve story quality, and dramatic conflict, in the form of adversarial dialogue, improves a dimension of story quality, such as entertainment (Baron & Bluck, 2011), interest; or boredom. Items that tap thrill, excitement and arousal would also appear to have face validity as measures of the effect of conflict.

**Conclusion of the review.** There is good, but incomplete evidence concerning what defines a story, and in particular key features from canonical story grammar linked by a causal pathway. Conflict does not feature in this conception. However, creating complex story grammar structures appears to be an identical process to developing structural conflict, and stories with these complex structures are rated higher in quality. While there is no empirical evidence linking causal pathways to conflict, the idea that conflict occupies key points in the causal pathway is an attractive one, because it takes the theory of the centrality of conflict to a dramatic story, and ties it to the demonstrated importance of the causal pathway to an audience. Moreover, there is evidence that conflict on the causal pathway leads to suspense, a known cause of audience enjoyment.

Suspense is one of a number of additional elements of a story which research shows lead to positive audience response, particularly enjoyment. Yet overall, the linking of this evidence to conflict is tenuous. Nor is there a body of more direct evidence of a positive effect of conflict on stories. In the absence of this empirical evidence, it is easy to form intriguing theories about what effects conflict has on stories and what the possible mechanisms of these effects might be. However, a major conclusion of this literature review is the need for empirical research to inform theory.

The concept conflict itself is ambiguous. Here we offer a distinction between structural conflict – consisting of the elements necessary for conflict, and the plotting to bring them together – and dramatic conflict, the moment-by-moment conflict, which may or may not be the result of the structural conflict. Dramatic conflict in the form of conflictual dialogue is the focus of this study.

In studying the effect of conflictual dialogue on a story, given that there is no empirical research indicating which dependent variables structural conflict or dramatic conflict are likely to effect, some global measure of story quality or goodness, combined with measures evaluating a broad range of judgements or emotional/cognitive responses would be ideal, preferably including items tapping constructs of boredom, interest, enjoyment, entertainment, tension and suspense.

### **Hypotheses**

Based on the rationale that increasing the dramatic conflict of story dialogue improves story quality and/or entertainment then we would expect the following:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* high levels of dramatic conflict will result in greater story quality ratings than low levels of dramatic conflict in a passage of story dialogue.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* high levels of dramatic conflict will result in greater entertainment ratings than low levels of dramatic conflict in a passage of story dialogue.

## **Method**

### **Pilot Study**

An unpublished pilot study involving 24 participants had previously been completed. The pilot study was in most ways similar to the present study (see below): it used the same stories and the same manipulations of the independent variable. However, there were three

levels of conflict (high, medium, low) rather than the two in the current study, and each participant read three stories rather than two. Measurement of the dependent variable in the pilot also used both the PSQI and an additional question as a manipulation check. In addition, and unlike the current study, there was a single question rating how good the story was and participants were asked to order the three stories they read from best to worst.

40 participants entered the study and 16 were excluded. The high exclusion rate was mainly because of participants skim reading stories or answering the comprehension questions incorrectly. The results suggested we could successfully manipulate the independent variable, with each increasing level of conflict producing a higher score on the manipulation check. Similarly, all three tests of story quality suggested the independent variable was having the predicted effect on the dependent variables. These effects while consistent were small.

With this in mind, it was felt that this study should be increased in power and simplified. The power was increased by increasing the number of participants recruited, while attempting to reduce exclusions by paying the participants more as a reward for slowing down. Simplification was achieved by having only two levels of conflict – the high and the low – as it was thought this would be enough to test the study’s hypotheses. Similarly, because the three measures of the dependent variable gave consistent results in the pilot, one was considered enough in this study. The simplification allowed for a shorter study, making it both cheaper, and easier for participants.

## **Participants**

**Sample size/ power analysis.** The study had a target sample size of 70 based on the power analysis.

There is no easy comparison in the literature for this research, but data from the pilot

suggested a small to medium effect size (Cohen's  $d$  of 0.35)(Jacob Cohen, 1988) for story quality measured with the PSQI, and a small to medium effect (Cohen's  $d$  of 0.44) for the entertainment question in the PSQI. Taking this into account, an *a priori* sample size analysis using G\*Power 3.1 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) suggests that measuring using the PSQI, a minimum sample of 59 would be needed to detect a difference between the 'low' and 'high' conditions, using a two-tailed paired t-test, and a Cohen's  $d$  of 0.35 (alpha = .05; desired power = 80%). With this in mind, and given a certain loss of data from the exclusion criteria described below, a sample of 70 was thought to provide adequate power.

**Recruitment.** Recruitment was via the online participant recruitment website Prolific (an online crowdsourcing data collection website for academics to recruit remotely located participants to take part in studies). Participants were paid £2.50 (US\$3.11) for 20 minutes study time (approximated from the pilot data to allow for leisurely reading). This level of remuneration is rated by Prolific as 'good' (Prolific, 2019), and was chosen to influence participants not to skim read, which in turn was hoped to lead to more accurate story ratings, and fewer participants excluded.

As a group, on-line scientific survey respondents are characteristically more educated than the regular population. Prolific participants are overwhelmingly from the United Kingdom and United States, and 75.32% have English as their first language. They must be 18 to join Prolific, and are mostly 20 to 40 in age. They are predominantly female, employed, and well educated (Prolific, 2019). However, to avoid comprehension problems, participants were recruited with English fluency, using Prolific's prescreening.

**Ethical considerations.**

This study did not present any major ethical tensions, and a low-risk notification was made to the Massey University (see Appendix A). The study used informed, voluntary consent (see Information Sheet in Appendix B); no risk of harm was anticipated to participants, researchers, institutions or groups; deception was not utilized in the study design; and no conflict of interest was identified. Participants were not being tested, rather they are being asked for their opinions. The stories in the research did not delve into sensitive areas regarding age, culture, religion, social class, or gender, other than a sexual harassment theme in the higher conflict version of the crime story. In this, the main protagonist, a woman working as a detective, was subjected to unwanted advances by a man she is interviewing, including sexualised comments and invasion of her personal space. The reasons for thinking that this was unlikely to cause significant discomfort to participants were: that similar treatment of these themes is common in stories the mainstream media; significant discomfort was not reported when testing out the stories; and the theme was flagged in the information sheet.

**Procedure**

The study was hosted on the Qualtrics survey platform (<https://www.qualtrics.com>), to which participants connected via Prolific. Participants were welcomed with a statement describing the study, and after consenting, read two different stories, each story at a different level of conflict, so that everyone got one low, and one high conflict story (see Appendix B). After reading the dialogue portion of each story, the participants completed a comprehension check, rated the story's quality (including a question on entertainment), and answered a manipulation check. They were then given the option of reading the end of the story, though this was not part of the study, and was included so participants' motivation was not affected by being



prevented from finding how each story ends. After reading two stories and the accompanying questions, the participants were asked “What do you believe this study is about?”, and invited to reply in one or two sentences. Finally, demographic data was collected (country of residence, age, and sex) (the Qualtrics survey is in Appendix B).

## **Design**

The design was a repeated measures experiment. As described in more detail below, there were two levels of the independent variable, dramatic conflict, low and high; and two dependent variables, story quality and entertainment.

The two levels of the independent variable were delivered in one high and one low dramatic conflict story-passage (see Materials). To avoid both order effects (particularly participant boredom), and unblinding, these passages came from different stories. Three stories (rather than two, the minimum needed for this design) in three genres (fantasy, romance and crime) were used to increase the generalisability of the study. These three stories were each manipulated to create the two levels of conflict and so produce six different story versions.

This meant that each participant did not read all the story versions. Because complete counterbalancing was not attempted in this design, there were multiple potential nuisance variables, most obviously story genre/type. However, by rotating the different levels of the nuisance variables (order and stories), in a similar way to a Latin squares design, the effect of story genre is naturally controlled for by the study – on average, across participants, any story genre/type effects are balanced across order and dramatic conflict.

In order to achieve this, the six story versions were arranged to produce 12 combinations as follows:

- Each combination must have two out of the six story versions.

- Each story must appear only once in each combination.
- Each level of dramatic conflict (low and high) must appear only once in each combination.
- Any order is permissible.

These 12 combinations/streams are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Participant Streams*

Presentation Order	Stream											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1 <sup>st</sup> Story	FH	FH	FL	FL	RH	RH	RL	RL	CH	CH	CL	CL
2 <sup>nd</sup> Story	RL	CL	RH	CH	FL	CL	FH	CH	FL	RL	FH	RH

*Note.* F = Fantasy, R= Romance, C = Crime; L = low dramatic conflict, H = high dramatic conflict

The “evenly present elements” option in Qualtrics was selected, such that Qualtrics presented streams in a pseudo-random pattern that ensured that there was a relatively even distribution of all the 12 combinations. Participants were blind to the condition they had been assigned.

## Materials

**Story type.** Because of the study’s idiosyncratic story requirements, and in particular the challenges of manipulating the independent variable, new stories were created. This was done by the author, who has a Masters in creative writing. Although this study did not focus on testing main or interaction effects of story genres, Story 1 could be described as a fantasy story, Story 2 as a romantic comedy, and Story 3 as a crime story.

**Creating conflict.** Because the tools for manipulating conflict, previously described, can be varied and combined in a multitude of ways, we developed guiding principles in their use:

- The techniques outlined in Adversarial dialogue, should be used to increase conflict (see below).
- That other than the increased conflict, the two versions of each story should be kept as similar as possible, and in particular what happens in each story version should remain the same.
- Within these boundaries, conflict should be increased as much is possible from the low conflict to the high conflict versions

Guided by these principles, we decided not to increase the conflict by changing the story goal and the forces of antagonism/obstacles to that goal, as altering these elements would substantially alter what happened in one version of the story, and potentially lead to confusion concerning whether we are testing structural conflict or dramatic conflict. Instead, we used the methods outlined in Adversarial dialogue: providing a reason for conflict, showing the resulting dramatic conflict, and adding intensifiers. In the pilot, when employing the first two of these methods (giving a reason, and showing the dramatic conflict); the combination gave the highest mean dramatic conflict ratings (over both no manipulation, and just showing the dramatic conflict), suggesting this gave the strongest manipulation. We further increased the strength of the manipulation using intensifiers as described in Table 3. Intensifiers have no effect in the absence of dramatic conflict – if there is no dramatic conflict, it does not matter, for example, that you have well matched protagonists – so intensifiers can be placed in both high and low conflict versions of the stories.

Because it is hard to create a story simply out of adversarial dialogue, it was decided that the dialogue should comprise a passage of the story. So, each story was divided into three parts. In the first part, the Introduction identified the characters, revealed the protagonist's story goal,

and noted intensifiers. In the high conflict version of each story, the reason for the protagonist's adversarial dialogue with another character was specified. The key elements of each story are shown in Table 3 including those identified in the first part of the story. In the second part of the story, the dialogue occurs. In the high conflict version of each story, content, body language, and dialogue specifiers were used, as described below, to increase the conflict. The third part finished the story through resolution of the story goal. As this did not manipulate the independent variable, there was only one version of the third part for each story.

Table 3  
*Key Elements in Dialogue Passages from Three Stories*

Story	Characters in dialogue	Story goal of protagonist	Reason for conflict	Intensifiers
Fantasy	Lo min Shaggor	Lo min wishes to magically fly	Shaggor wishes to dominate the relationship.	Evenly matched characters, Meet face-to-face, Shaggor is engaged to Lo min's sister
Romance	Wendy Shay	Wendy wants to catch the attention of a man	Shay wants Wendy to be more adventurous.	Evenly matched characters, Meet face-to-face, Shay is Wendy's sister
Crime	Ali Zach	Ali wishes to prove her client's innocence	Zac views women as sex objects.	Evenly matched characters, Meet face-to-face

The neutral dialogue in the low conflict version of each story was revised line by line to give conflictual content, tone, and body language in the high conflict version. For example, here is the low conflict version of an exchange between Lo min and Shaggor, as they discuss scaling a giant pillar to meet the wizard Baal-pteor:

“Remember, Baal-pteor cannot be harmed by weapons wielded by human hand,”  
said Lo min. “And it is a tricky climb.”

Once again, Shaggor studied the pillar, then with evident reluctance, abandoned the sword.

Compare the high conflict version of the same lines:

“You forget, Baal-pteor cannot be harmed by weapons wielded by human hand,” said Lo min. “But if having the sword lessens your fear...”

Shaggor glared at Lo min, but he abandoned the sword.

The neutral “Remember” is replaced by the implied criticism of “You forget”; the neutral advice about the climb is replaced by insinuations of cowardice; and the neutral body language of studying the pillar is replaced by a glare.

The total number of episodes of verbal conflict seemed a useful metric in comparing the high and low conflict versions of a story. Psychologists have developed tools for tallying conflictual verbal behaviours (Moyers, Martin, Manuel, Miller, & Ernst, 2009), a method which can be adapted to give the relevant amount of verbal conflict in the two story versions. This was done by tallying the number of episodes using a combined list of behaviours based on Patterson (2013) and Moyers et al. (2009) (see Appendix C). Table 4 shows how the different dialogue passages differ in their relative number of conflictual verbal behaviours between low and high conflict versions of the three stories. To give a sense of how frequently the conflictual behaviours occur in the high conflict passage, the word count is included.

Table 4

*Tallies of Verbal Conflict Behaviours in Dialogue Passages from Three Stories, Low and High Conflict*

Story	Low conflict passage	High conflict passage	Word counts in high conflict passage
1	0	13	433
2	6	23	758
3	0	26	1163

## Measures

Measurement in this study can be thought of as answering two questions. Firstly, does conflictual dialogue improve overall story quality? For this an overall measure of story quality was needed (as opposed to emotional reaction to a story, for example Bartsch (2012)). Secondly, if there is an overall improvement in story quality, can we identify specific changes suggested by the literature review such as entertainment? The PSQI appeared a promising measure in this regard: It gives an overall rating story quality, which as a multi-item instrument should be more reliable than a single question on story quality, and contains multiple dimensions, including an item for entertainment: “To what extent is this story entertaining?”. Moreover, it is simple to use, and while there had been limited research on its psychometric properties, this is still more research than the alternatives. Set against this, it did not specifically measure boredom, interest, enjoyment, tension and excitement.

The PSQI has six items of which two are negatively worded and reversed for scoring. Responses to the PSQI are made on a 5-point Likert-type scale with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Total score for the PSQI will therefore be in the range 6-30 (Baron & Bluck, 2011). During the pilot the wording of the anchors for the scores (Not at all, Somewhat, A little, Very, and Extremely) were felt to be ambiguous, and so these were rewritten for clarity to read: Not at all, Slightly, Moderately, Very, and Extremely.

Little is written in the literature concerning measuring conflict in stories, so when designing the manipulation check, it was decided to measure perceived levels of conflict, using a question based on the format of the PSQI (in order to disguise the question’s intent): a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Extremely), with the prompt: “To what extent is the relationship between the two characters conflictual?” (“conflictual” was chosen as more

likely to be meaningful to participants than using some form of the words “dramatic conflict”). Data from the pilot suggested that answers to this question reflect the differing levels of conflict in the dialogues.

The comprehension checks involved three multichoice questions, each with three choices, testing recall of content and comprehension. Table 5 gives an example (other questions are in Appendix D).

Table 5

*Example of Multi Choice Comprehension Question*

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What does Shaggor want to take to the top of the pillar?	
<input type="radio"/>	His sword
<input type="radio"/>	A rope
<input type="radio"/>	A skull

---

## Data Processing and Analysis

**Analysis software.** R programming language (R Core Team, 2016) with additional packages from the Tidyverse (Wickham et al., 2019) and nlme (Pinheiro, Bates, DebRoy, Sarkar, & Team, 2013).

**Data quality check.** It was not planned to use attention checks because of the potential to degrade the data quality, for example by introducing demographic bias (Qualtrics, 2018), but there were comprehension checks, and reading time was measured.

**Data exclusion.** Participants were prescreened by Prolific to ensure they were over 18 and had fluency in English. If they answered ‘No’ to the consent question, participants were directed out of the survey using Qualtrics survey flow settings.

Participants were also excluded from data processing if the answer to the blinding question (“What do you believe this study is about? Please write your answer in one or two sentences.”) mentioned conflict or words with equivalent meaning. Participants were excluded if

they failed the comprehension checks, which required answering two out of three multichoice questions correctly, that it is to say the participant had to do better than chance.

Participants were excluded if they were skim reading. Normal reading speed is around 150-250 words per minute (wpm) (Dyson & Haselgrove, 2001; Just, Carpenter, & Masson, 1982), while college educated adults read at about 200 to 400 wpm (Rayner, Schotter, Masson, Potter, & Treiman, 2016). Increasing reading speed is generally achieved at the expense of comprehension (Poulton, 1958), however, this appears to be a gradual process, and varies from person to person. Therefore, cut-offs are arbitrary, and as we only wanted to exclude those who were clearly skimming, a cut-off of 500 wpm (using the Qualtrics timing function) was used for the first two sections of each story.

If the computer returned a response to an item outside the available range of responses, or responses had a Qualtrics status value other than 0 (normal response) then the response was excluded.

Participants that had any of the items of the PSQI missing were excluded. This listwise deletion could potentially have given biased estimates (Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010), but as the PSQI has only 6 items it seemed probable that few participants would answer some of its items but not all – in the pilot only one participant did this out of 40.

We did not have any exclusion criteria for extreme outliers because our use of an online survey with items in a rating scale format limited the possibility.

To check the manipulation of the independent variable, a paired sample t-test compared the mean of the total perceived conflict score in the high and low conflict groups. The manipulation would be considered successful if the mean conflict score in the high conflict condition was significantly greater ( $p < .05$ ) than the mean conflict score in the low conflict



condition. If the test indicated the manipulation did not work then the study results with respect to the hypotheses would be unsubstantiated.

**Critical comparisons.** To test H1, a paired sample t-test compared the mean of the total PSQI score (the measure of the first dependent variable, story quality) in the high and low dramatic conflict conditions (dramatic conflict was the independent variable), which was presented in two different stories. The analysis compared participants' responses in the low and high conflict conditions regardless of which stories were presented. H1 would be considered to be supported if the mean PSQI score in the high conflict condition was significantly greater ( $p < .05$ ) than the mean PSQI score in the low conflict condition.

To test H2, a second paired sample t-test compared the mean rating of story entertainment (the second dependent variable) using the "entertaining" question from the PSQI, in the high and low conflict groups. H2 would be considered to be supported if the mean entertaining score in the high conflict condition was significantly greater ( $p < .05$ ) than the mean entertaining score in the low conflict condition.

**Preregistration and data availability statement.** A preregistration, and deidentified study data may be found at the Open Science Framework:

[https://osf.io/n6pbz/?view\\_only=bfbe61860c7d4f28896a9a2ea30ab227](https://osf.io/n6pbz/?view_only=bfbe61860c7d4f28896a9a2ea30ab227).

Minimal changes were made to the study post preregistration: conflict was more precisely defined as a combination of structural conflict and dramatic conflict; and a post hoc analysis to assess the importance of missing data (described in the Results section) was carried out.

## Results

Recruitment commenced and was completed September 23, 2020. 69 participants entered the study; 13 participants were excluded through incorrect answers in the comprehension checks or for skim reading or both; separately one participant was excluded for mentioning conflict in the question testing blinding; separately 6 participants were excluded due to an error in the pseudo-randomization. Participants in stream 7 (see Table 2), as their second story, should have been presented with the high conflict version of the fantasy story, instead, because 7 was rendered as 17 in the Qualtrics program, these participants got no second story. These latter exclusions are possibly best characterised as data missing at random (Heitjan, 1994). To assess whether this loss of stream 7 had a meaningful effect on the analysis, a multilevel model was used (see the end of this section).

The 49 participants remaining had an average age of 25.43 (range 18-47, SD 6.71). 17 participants identified as female and 32 as male. Table 6 shows the frequency of the country of residence.

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**Table 6**

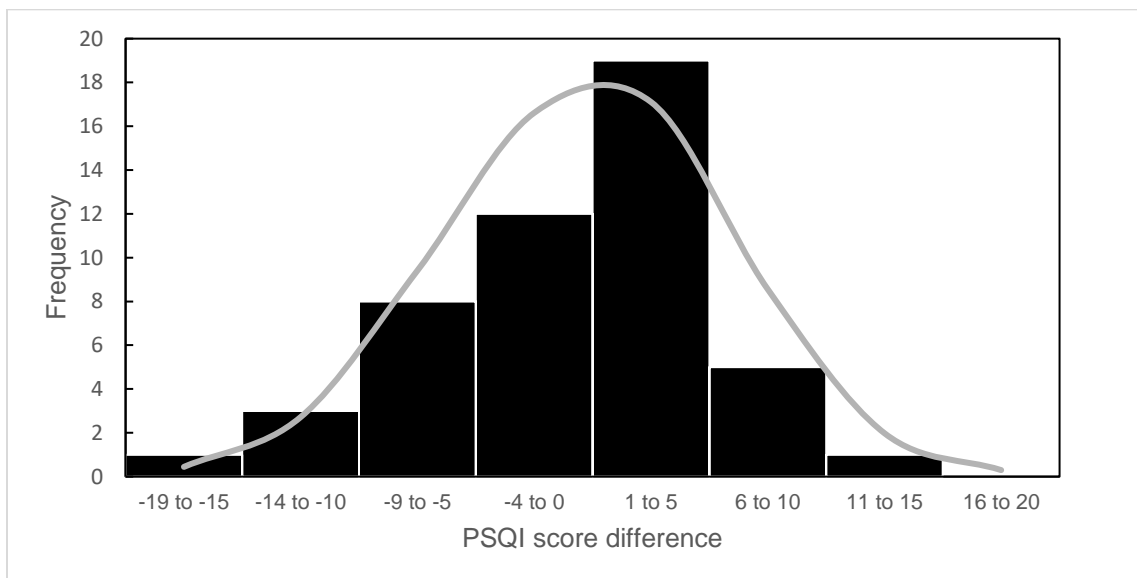
*Country of Residence of Participants*

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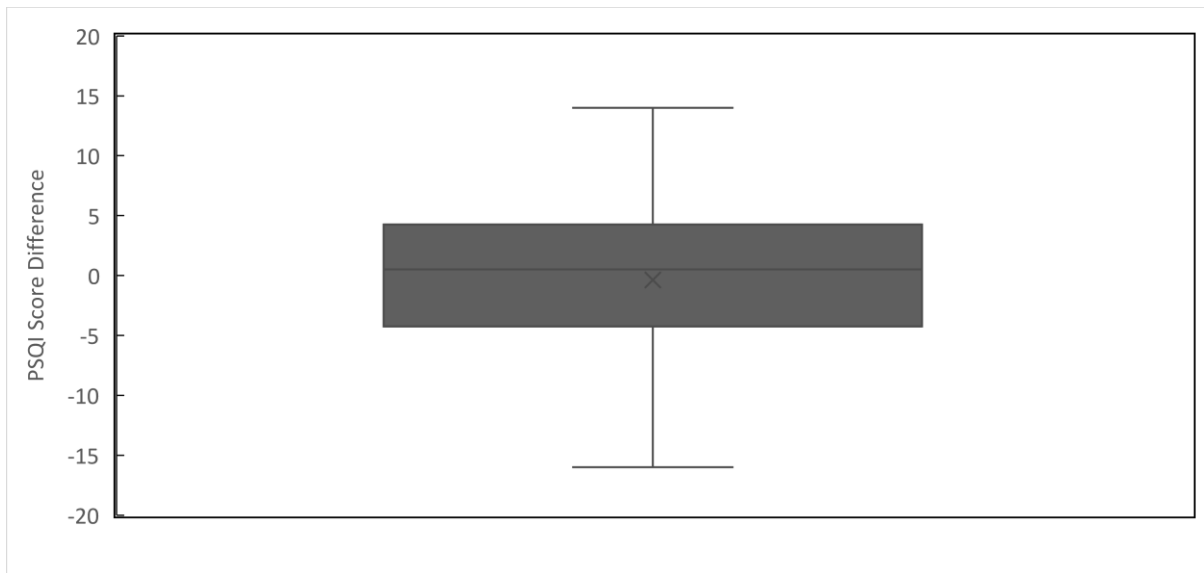
Country	Frequency
Portugal	14
Mexico	10
Australia	5
United States	4
United Kingdom	3
Chile	3
Canada	2
Poland	2
Greece	2
Japan	1
Finland	1
New Zealand	1
South Africa	1

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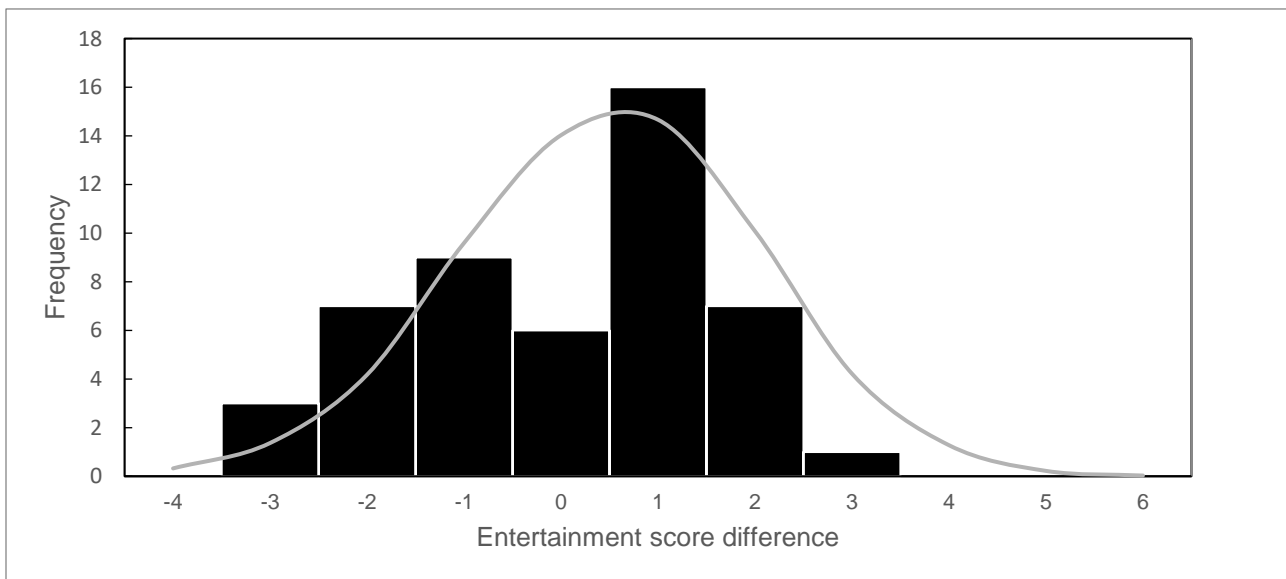
With regard to the assumptions of the t-test, this is not a random sample; and while story quality and entertainment are probably continuous variables, the PSQI data rounds to five possible values, introducing a degree of measurement error. The independence of the difference terms was not tested, but it can be reasonably assumed given participants are unlikely to participate more than once (having a unique Prolific identification number). The distribution of the difference between the paired PSQI scores was approximately normally distributed (Figure 1), skew -0.40, kurtosis 0.1. The difference between PSQI scores did not contain outliers (see Figure 2). The distribution of the difference between the paired PSQI entertainment scores was approximately normally distributed (see Figure 3), skew -0.29, kurtosis -1.07. The difference between the entertainment scores did not contain outliers (Figure 4). The sampling distribution of the difference between the paired conflict scores was approximately normally distributed (Figure 5), skew -0.54, kurtosis -0.2. The difference between PSQI scores did not contain any outliers (Figure 6).



*Figure 1.* Histogram showing the distribution of the difference between high and low PSQI scores as a test of the assumption of normality for the paired t-test. For comparison, a normal curve of data generated from random numbers with the same mean and SD is added.



*Figure 2.* Boxplot of the difference between PSQI scores to test for outliers. Outliers, in this case defined using the interquartile rule, would show above and below the whiskers.



*Figure 3.* Histogram showing the distribution of the difference between high and low entertainment scores as a test of the assumption of normality for the paired t-test. For comparison, a normal curve of data generated from random numbers with the same mean and SD is added.

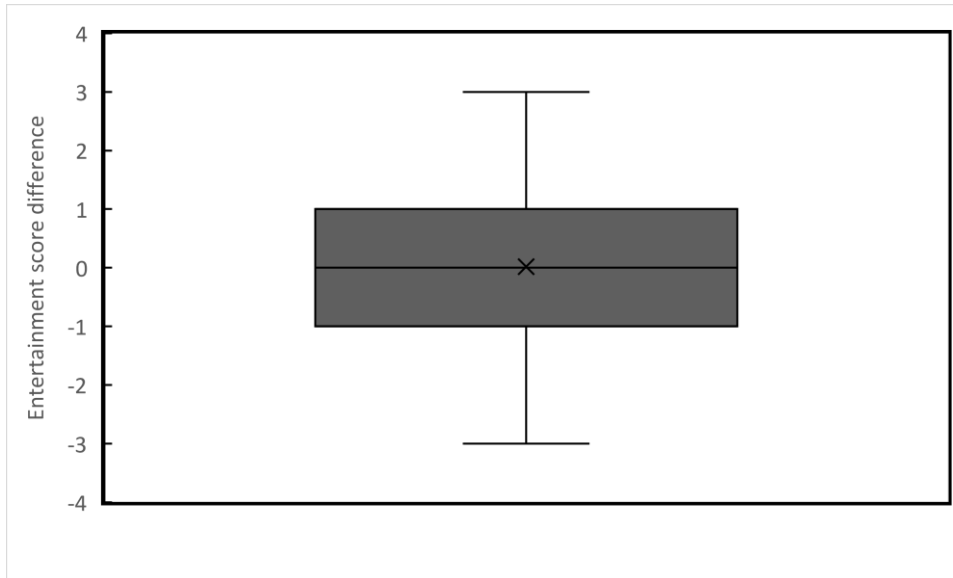


Figure 4. Boxplot of the difference between Entertainment scores to test for outliers.

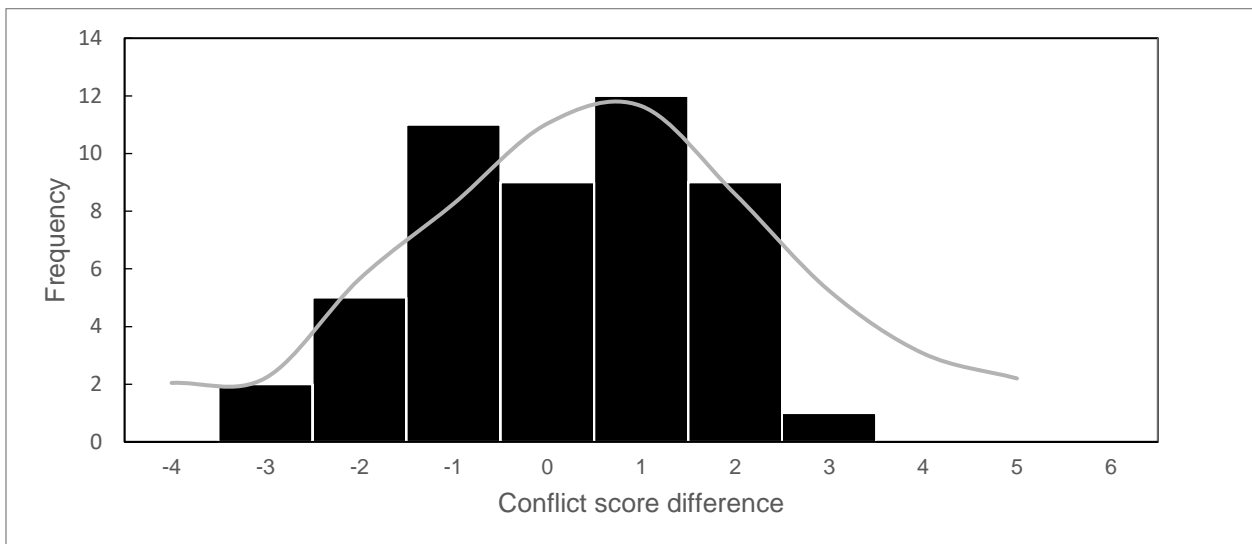


Figure 5. Histogram showing the distribution of the difference between high and low conflict scores as a test of the assumption of normality for the paired t-test. For comparison, a normal curve of data generated from random numbers with the same mean and SD is added.

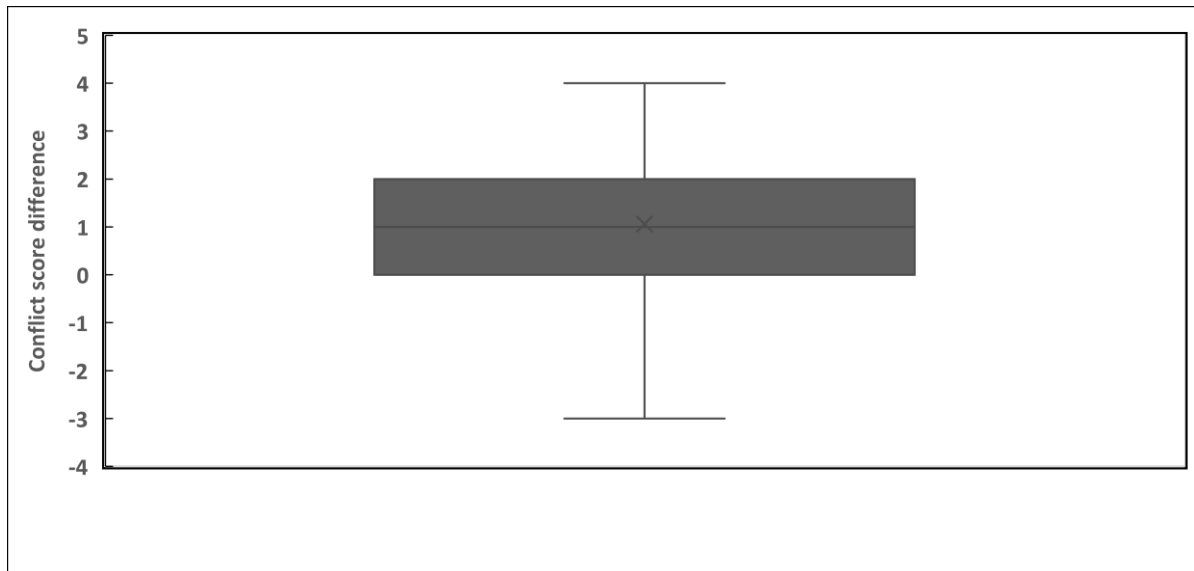


Figure 6. Boxplot of the difference between Conflict scores to test for outliers.

Descriptive statistics are given in Table 7.

Table 7

*Means, Standard Deviations, Standard Errors, and Confidence Intervals in Scores in the High and Low Conflict Story Conditions*

Measure		M	SD	SE	95% CI
PSQI:	High	18.96	4.09	0.58	[17.79, 20.13]
	Low	19.33	4.02	0.58	[18.17, 20.48]
Entertainment:		3.04	1.04	0.15	[2.74, 3.34]
		3.02	1.01	0.14	[2.73, 3.31]
Conflict:		3.35	1.01	0.14	[3.06, 3.64]
		2.29	1.01	0.16	[1.97, 2.60]

On average when participants read a story passage with high conflict dialogue, they rated the relationship between the characters more conflictual than when they read a story passage with low conflict dialogue. This mean difference, 1.06, 95% CI [-1.52, -0.59], was significant  $t(48) = -4.61$ ,  $p\text{-value} < .001$ , Cohen's  $d$  1.05.

On average when participants read a story passage with high conflict dialogue, they rated it very slightly lower in quality than when they read a story passage with low conflict. This

mean difference, 0.37, 95% CI [-1.38, 2.11], was not significant,  $t(48) = 0.42$ ,  $p = .67$ , Cohen's  $d = -0.18$ .

On average when participants read a story passage with high conflict dialogue, they rated it only very slightly more entertaining than when they read a story passage with low conflict. This mean difference, 0.02, 95% CI [-0.47, 0.43], was not significant  $t(48) = -0.09$ ,  $p$ -value = .93, Cohen's  $d = 0.02$ .

The loss of data, through losing stream 7 (see Table 2) decreased the power of the study, and introduced potential bias by creating a correlation – the low conflict stories were less likely to be romance stories, and the high conflict stories less likely to be fantasy stories. In an attempt to address this, we created a multilevel model, with random intercepts for the three genres/stories, so controlling for the effect of genre/story. The idea was both to reduce the noise in the PSQI ratings, and thus increase power to detect an effect of conflict, and get a sense of how much genre might be affecting the results. The intercept only model showed an intraclass correlation coefficient for the grouping variable (individuals) was 0.00, suggesting individual differences made no difference to the PSQI ratings, and that the multilevel model was unlikely to give different results. The fixed effects in Table 8 suggests any effect of genre/story was insignificant.

**Table 8***Fixed Effects of the Multilevel Model*

Genre/story	Intercept value	Standard error	Degrees of freedom	t-value	p-value
Crime	19.61	0.77	48	25.53	0.000
Fantasy	-1.14	1.01	46	-1.13	0.265
Romance	-1.06	0.98	46	-1.09	0.283

*Note.* The Crime row gives the PSQI, y axis intercept value (second column), where high conflict is (counterintuitively, because it is lower) considered to be 0 on the x axis. The Fantasy and Romance rows give intercepts relative to this.

### Discussion

This research is part of a broad theoretical and empirical literature which attempts to answer the question: What makes a good story? In this case, asking whether conflict is part of what makes a good story. The specific aim of this research was to show whether increasing the levels of the dramatic conflict in a passage of story dialogue leads to increased rating of the story quality and/or increased rating of the entertainment by study participants. Clarifying the effect of dramatic conflict would have practical benefits for those engaged in writing stories, could lead to a refinement in the scientific conception of what makes for a good story, and potentially give insight into the workings of the human mind. However, while this study was convincingly able to manipulate the levels of perceived conflict in story dialogue, this manipulation did not have a meaningful effect on perceived story quality or entertainment.

How do these findings sit within the existing literature? In this study, the changes to the dialogue recommended in the literature in order to increase dramatic conflict (Patterson, 2013; Ware et al., 2012), increased the perceived level of conflict between the characters. As the dialogue was the only element which differed between the high and low conflict versions of the stories this is strong evidence that the dialogue, as predicted, was perceived as more conflictual.



This change in perceived level of conflict was both statistically significant and – using the criteria of a Cohen's  $d$  of more than 0.8 (Jacob Cohen, 1988) – had a large to very large effect size. This study did not differentiate to what extent the different manipulations (giving a reason for conflict, showing the conflict, and adding intensifiers) altered the perceived level of conflict, though the pilot suggested each contributed to the effect.

Despite this successful manipulation, participants did not rate the stories with conflictual dialogue as higher in quality or entertainment than the stories with neutral dialogue. This is in contrast to the existing literature, where there is both a body of empirical evidence showing that people rate the quality of stories with structural conflict, and dramatic conflict more highly (Diener & Woody, 1981; A. McCabe & Peterson, 1984; Pratt & Robins, 1991; N. L. Stein & Policastro, 1984); and expert opinion that adversarial dialogue is more entertaining (Axelrod, 2013; Bell, 2014; Frey, 2010; Hough, 2015; S. Stein, 1995).

There are a number of possible explanations for this.

Firstly, there may have been no measurable effect because there was no meaningful effect. Conflict in dialogue may not improve the quality of a story or make a story more entertaining. Why should this be, when the literature says that there ought to be an improvement? One explanation which would fit with the literature relates to the division of conflict in this study into structural conflict and dramatic conflict (a distinction absent from previous empirical research). These results do not suggest that structural conflict effects no improvement in a story, only that dramatic conflict in the form of conflictual dialogue effects no improvement when disconnected from structural conflict. It may be that in order for dramatic conflict to improve a story, it needs to be connected to structural conflict. In other words, the dramatic conflict is placed at key points on the causal pathway, where the outcome of the dramatic conflict can

change the direction of the story. One particularly striking finding from the research literature is the centrality of the causal pathway (Bower & Rinck, 1999; Sundermeier, van der Broek, & Zwaan, 2005; Trabasso & Van Den Broek, 1985; Upal, 2011). Things that do not affect the causal pathway tend to be ignored, and this may include dramatic conflict. Furthermore, dramatic conflict which affects the main causal pathway is likely to be a stronger manipulation as more is at stake (Ware et al., 2012). Dramatic conflict that does not relate directly to the causal pathway may seem pointless or even contrived.

Secondly, methodological flaws may have led to a type II error. Possible methodological flaws include measurement problems, insufficient sample size, and issues involving the manipulation of the independent variable.

Potential measurement problems include measurement error, and not measuring the right dependent variable. The first two problems may have derived from inadequate conceptualization of both the independent and dependent variables in the literature (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) leading to insufficiently precise conceptualisations in this study. We wanted to measure story quality. The conceptualization of story quality used in the study was that of the PSQI measurement, and while the PSQI appeared the best option, its validity has not been rigorously tested. Similar issues relate to the PSQI item measuring entertainment. Moreover, the PSQI may be an insufficiently broad conceptualisation of story quality to capture important effects of conflict— for example, it does not measure how boring a story is.

The sample size estimated as necessary to detect a significant effect was calculated using data from the pilot, which suggested a small to medium effect size (Cohen's  $d$  of 0.35). This may have been an overestimate of the effect size which in turn led to underestimating the sample size needed to detect an effect. This underestimate was compounded when the exclusion criteria

eliminated more participants than predicted, and then more participants were eliminated because they were not properly pseudo-randomised. With regard to the former exclusions, it was hoped, based on the pilot, that increasing the financial reward would increase reading times, thus having a direct positive effect to decrease exclusions from skim reading, and indirect effect on decreasing exclusions from answering the comprehension checks. However, despite increased mean reading times compared to the pilot, exclusion rates remained high. It is possible, given the geographical spread of the participants, that English fluency was not as good as reported to Prolific, making the comprehension checks more difficult.

The manipulation of conflict may not have been strong enough to produce a measurable effect on the dependent variables. While the changes to the dialogue worked as predicted in this study to increase the conflict in the dialogue, there are a number of ways to increase conflict (Ware et al., 2012), and it would be potentially possible to increase the manipulation using these. Additionally, if one of the effects of conflict is mediated by ADT, more effort into making one character more sympathetic than the other, and the sympathetic character the “victor” in the conflictual dialogue exchange may have made a difference. It is also relevant that writing is more of an art than a science, and the skill of the writer creating the dramatic conflict is likely to have an effect on the strength of the manipulation. However, more extreme dramatic conflict which does not affect the causal chain seems more likely to appear contrived. In addition to issues around the strength of the manipulation, there are almost endless variations in the form in which dramatic conflict could manifest itself in a story, and the different forms of conflict could have different effects on the audience independent of the strength of the manipulation.

Looking at these methodological issues overall, the two most important difficulties appear the lack of power, and the lack of certainty around the utility of the PSQI.

Less of an explanation, and more of an intriguing parallel, is the research into violence in media which indicates that people are attracted to stories with violence but enjoy them less (Weaver, 2011). Why this should be is far from clear, but given that the concepts of conflict and violence would appear to overlap, could some similar process be at work here? Does dramatic conflict attract people to stories without increasing their enjoyment?

An unexpected finding in this study was the lower ratings of quality with the addition of conflict to dialogue. However, given the lack of statistical significance and the small effect size of this finding, it seems most likely an indication of the manipulation having no effect. This lack of meaningful effect was not confined to conflict – the multi-level analysis showed neither genre/story type or even individual differences had a significant impact on quality ratings. These are puzzling findings. Equally unexplained, is the contrast between the demographic profile of the population of Prolific participants (Prolific, 2019) and the sample. To give examples: the population is predominantly female, the sample predominantly male; and the population is from countries where English is the first language, the sample is not. However, other than issues with English as a second language, noted above, it is hard to see how this would alter the result of the study.

The theoretical significance of the study, therefore, is that it does not fit with the current empirical and theoretical literature on the importance of conflict in stories. While in particular the results cast doubt on the benefits of adding conflict to dialogue, they also call into question the importance of all dramatic conflict. In turn, if dramatic conflict is of minor importance to a story, this would require a rethink of how structural conflict achieves its effects. From a practical perspective, no current research relies on creating dramatic conflict to improve story quality, so the findings of this research on both the successful manipulation of conflict in

dialogue and the lack of effect on perceived story quality and entertainment would currently appear most important to those engaged in writing story dialogue for non-scientific purposes.

Beyond the methodological difficulties with the research noted above, there are potential limitations in terms of generalisability. The research tested only one form of dramatic conflict, and while it used three different stimuli, these were all by the same author. Yet as all forms of dramatic conflict are meant to improve a story, and as the results lent support to the null hypotheses, this seems less of an issue – it takes only one exception to require a re-examination of a hypothesis. In a similar way, while the sample was a sample of convenience rather than a random sample, the theory that dramatic conflict improves the perception of stories does not specify that this only applies to certain people – it is meant to be a universal phenomenon.

So, the limitations in the study which might be addressed in future research are largely methodological: an increased sample size; and potentially a rethink of the measurement. In retrospect it would have been wise to supplement the PSQI in two ways. Firstly, to alleviate validity concerns, adding a concurrent test of story quality – such as asking participants to rate how ‘good’ a story was, or asking participants to rank stories from best to worst. Secondly, so as not to miss potentially important dependent variables, adding items suggested by the literature review as variables potentially affected by the manipulation but possibly not captured by the PSQI -- boredom, interest, enjoyment, tension and excitement.

In conclusion, this study attempted to provide evidence to support the widely held theory that conflict improves story quality, and more specifically that conflictual dialogue improves story quality and is more entertaining. No evidence supporting these theories was identified. In the absence of similar research, and in an underpowered study, one should be careful not to over interpret these results or magnify their importance, yet it does suggest these theories need further

empirical testing. One promising area for future study is whether isolating dramatic conflict from structural conflict, as was the case in this study, may rob it of its impact.

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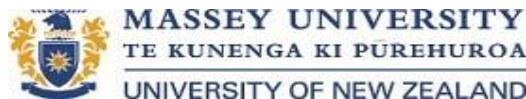
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**Appendix A**  
**Ethics Notification Registration**



Date: 20 May 2019

Dear John William Berks

Re: Ethics Notification - **4000021701 Low risk Ethics Application for: The Effect of Manipulating Conflict Level on Perceived Story Quality**

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

If situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your ethical analysis, please contact a Research Ethics Administrator.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer

**A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:**

*"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research."*

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director - Ethics, telephone 06 3569099 ext 85271, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)."*

Please note, if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish requires evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again, answering "yes" to the publication question to provide more information for one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Craig Johnson  
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

**Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise**

Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand **T** 06 350 5573; 06 350 5575 **F** 06 355 7973 **E** [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz) **W** <http://humanethics.massey.ac.nz>

## Appendix B Qualtrics Survey

4/12/2020 Qualtrics Survey Software

### Block Information Sheet

## Evaluation of Two Scenes in Two Fictional Short Stories

### Information Sheet

#### Who am I?

My name is John Berks. I am a psychology student at Massey University. This research is a part of my Psychology Master's Degree. No conflict of interest has been identified in this research.

#### Information

I am inviting you to participate in this research project. Your agreement would be greatly appreciated.

#### What is the research?

The purpose of the research is to understand how people evaluate stories, as explained below.

#### Who do I want for the study?

This study uses Prolific to recruit people to read different versions of short fictional stories, so, I am looking for people who read English well. I do not anticipate there will be significant discomforts or risks to participants. However, versions of one story do contain a theme of sexual harassment.

#### What would you do in this research?

You would read 2 passages taken from 2 short stories. After each passage you will answer questions about the passage. The combined time for reading instructions, the leisurely reading of 2 story passages, and answering questions is estimated to be 14 minutes. There will be an opportunity to finish reading each of the stories, which is optional, and estimated to take 4 minutes in total. Payment will be at the 'good' rate of £7.50 an hour or £2.50 for the whole study (allowing 20 minutes total study time). Payment is at this 'good' rate to allow you to take your time reading the stories. Skim reading stories will mean your data will be excluded from the study.

#### What happens with my data?

You will not be asked to provide your name in this research. The data I collect will initially only be accessible by me and my supervisor. Once the data has been analysed, we will ensure that any information that might indicate who you are has been removed, and then post the data in an online repository indefinitely. Other researchers and members of the public will be able to obtain the anonymized data from this repository.

#### Your Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to decline to answer any particular question.

#### Our Contact information

If you have queries regarding this project, please contact the following:

**Researcher** John Berks School of Psychology Massey University Albany, Auckland  
New Zealand +64 21 852532 Email: John.Berks@waitematadhb.govt.nz

**Supervisor** Dr Matt Williams School of Psychology Massey University Albany,  
Auckland

New Zealand +64 9 414-0800 ext 43117 M.N.Williams@massey.ac.nz

*Massey University School of Psychology – Te Kura Hinengaro Tangata Auckland, New Zealand*

*T +64 9 414-0800 ext 43116 : W psychology.massey.ac.nz*

*This research project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researchers named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researchers, please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), telephone 06 356 9099, extn 85271, email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.*

## Consent

### Respondent Consent

I understand the information sheet and consent to the collection of my responses. (Please click on the 'Yes' choice if you wish to continue.)

Yes, I consent

No, I do not consent

### Stop without completing

As you do not wish to participate in this study, please **return** your submission on Prolific by selecting the 'Stop without completing' button.

### prolific ID

Please enter your Prolific ID:

### Fantasy FHigh - part 1

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### Instructions

Please read the Introduction and First Part of the Story and then answer the questions that follow. You will need to read carefully.

### Introduction

In which Lo min learns to fly.

Lo min and Shaggor are on an almost impossible quest to rescue Lo min's sister from the



inaccessible Mountain Palace. Lo min is a warrior monk. Shaggor is an adventurer who is betrothed to Lo min's sister. Out of necessity they have joined forces; but Shaggor wishes to dominate the partnership, while Lo min wants a partnership of equals.

In this adventure, they are trying to obtain a spell of flying to aid in their quest to reach the Mountain Palace.

### **First Part of the Story**

In the wind-blasted scrub-land that edges the desert, among the ruins of a once great city, a solitary pillar stood: A pillar of red rock so enormous as to suggest it was once part of a structure built for creatures beyond human dimensions. A dotted-line of spikes crawled up the pillar to its very summit.

Near to the pillar base, in the shade of a stunted gulabaa tree, stood Lo min and Shaggor. Shaggor, feet apart, arms akimbo, chin tilted upwards, surveyed the pillar as if it were a personal opponent.

“Behold Baal-pteor's Column!” he proclaimed.

Lo min stared at the pillar. It had been three years since she had attempted a serious climb.

“It is a long and arduous ascent.” Shaggor raised a hand to illustrate. “And an equally lengthy but easy drop in the other direction.” He slapped the hand down into his palm, looked sideway at Lo min, and smirked.

Lo min met his gaze but did not reply.

“Those spikes driven into the pillar seem real enough, don't they?” continued Shaggor.

“What of it?”

“Ascending, they are as visible and solid as this blade.” To illustrate his point Shaggor drew his dagger and waved it under Lo min's nose. “Yet if you try to descend...”

Shaggor's hands fluttered around the knife and it vanished.

“You are a wizard!”

“A trick to impress maidens,” sneered Shaggor, plucking the dagger from his sleeve and re-sheathing it. “So, the only ways down from the wizard's pillar are by flying or falling. Regard that white shape, beside the clump of dhurugrass: a human skull bleached by the sun and gnawed on by wintibirri – no doubt, a previous student of flight. Do you think your skull will join him?”

“You don't have to venture the climb,” said Lo min. “If heights make you afraid.”

Shaggor spat.

Lo min unslung her pack and pulled out a length of rope.

“Who brings a rope to the desert?” demanded Shaggor. “We do not need rope to climb up, and it is too short to aid our descent.”

“Where I come from, a careful traveler always carries rope.” Her father had ventured out without a rope three years ago, and fallen down a cliff. “We tie ourselves together and then...”

“Foolishness,” interrupted Shaggor. “Where I come from, a wise traveler always carries his sword.”

He started to tie his scabbard and sword across his shoulders.

“You forget, Baal-pteor cannot be harmed by weapons wielded by human hand,” said Lo min. “But if having the sword lessens your fear...”

Shaggor glared at Lo min, but he abandoned the sword.

### **Comp\_check\_F\_Stage1**

Please answer the 3 questions below about the passage you have just read.

What does Shaggor want to take to the top of the pillar?

- His sword
- A rope
- A skull

Shaggor names two ways of descending the pillar: flying and what other method?

- By rope
- By falling
- Via the iron spikes

Which of Lo min's relatives has died?

- Father
- Elder brother
- Younger brother

### **Mid-story questions\_Stage1**

Please answer the 7 questions below about the passage you have just read.

#### **Perceived Story Quality Index**

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	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Slightly</b>	<b>Moderately</b>	<b>Very</b>	<b>Extremely</b>
--	-----------------------	-----------------	-------------------	-------------	------------------

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<b>To what extent is this story entertaining?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>To what extent is this story <u>un</u>emotional?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>To what extent is this story memorable?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>To what extent is this story <u>un</u>original?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>To what extent is this story rich in imagery?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>To what extent is this story engaging?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

---

### Query for More Story\_Stage1

Would you like to read the rest of the story?

### Fantasy - part 2

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### The End of the Story

Up the seemingly endless path of iron spikes Lo min climbed. Her movements appeared effortless, yet she proceeded upwards with rapidity. By contrast, below her, Shaggor was all muscular effort -- trying to master the pillar by brute force.

The final part of the ascent, high above the ground, where the shaft of the pillar met the ornate capital, required Lo min to clamber upwards and outwards, in danger of her feet slipping away from the climbing surface. Here she slowed, but she continued steadily up, and finally levered herself over the lip, out of the pillar's shadow and into the full sunlight.

The top of the pillar was flat, with room enough to build a small house. In the center of this surface a man stood on one bony leg. The other leg was tucked up to form a triangle. He was naked except for a stained loincloth. Whatever the original colour of his skin, the sun had baked it to a dark, mottled brown. He had long, matted, black hair, and a grey bush of a beard. In one gnarled hand he held a butterfly net. Round his head flitted what, at first glance, appeared to be three small birds.

Lo min made the elaborate dipping-crane bow, hands outstretched to show peaceful intentions.

The man remained motionless.

Behind Lo min, she could hear grunting and swearing getting closer. She turned and looked over the edge. A red-faced Shaggor was nearing the summit. Below him, the line of spikes had vanished. Lo min viewed the long drop with unease.

It was as Shaggor reached for the final spike that it happened. One foot slipped from a spike. Then the other. For a long moment he hung in space. One desperate hand gripping a spike was all that held him from plummeting to earth. Ignoring the drop, Lo min leaned far down, grabbed Shaggor's sleeve, and with more strength than seemed possible in such a small frame, dragged him up and over the lip, until he could scramble his way to safety.

Shaggor lay, panting and staring at Lo min. She stared back.

Eventually Shaggor said: "That is twice now that you have saved my life."

The two mismatched adventurers walked forward warily, watching the man on one leg. As she got closer, Lo min realised the three flying creatures circling the man were a large orange butterfly, a hummingbird, and a micro-bat.

Shaggor made an ornate bow. As he did so, he spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I trust it was not an idle boast, when you claimed you could communicate with this old fool."

"This venerable wizard has taken a vow of silence, not a vow of deafness," said Lo min.

She looked for signs that Baal-pteor had taken offence. Two beady eyes regarded her from under shaggy brows. Then he smiled. His teeth were yellow.

"Greetings wise one, I am Lo min, a humble traveler seeking your assistance."

There followed an exchange of signs and gestures between Lo min and Baal-pteor.

"Speak!" growled Shaggor. "What does the venerable wizard say?"

"He says, there are three spells disguised as animals, one only is the true spell of flying, which will activate the moment you leap from the pillar. The others only appear real. He fears we will not choose wisely."

Baal-pteor nodded and smiled, then he tossed the butterfly net to Lo min.

"You first it seems," said Shaggor. "Stepping off the pillar will tell us what we need to know."

Lo min threw the butterfly net to Shaggor.

He protested: “Baal-pteor gave clear indication that you were first.”

Lo min unslung the rope from her shoulders.

Baal-pteor sneered and made a sign.

“What foolery is this?” Lo min translated.

Lo min looped the rope back on itself and began to tie a knot. “Where I come from, when we wish to catch animals, we use this knot.”

Baal-pteor laughed, a silent laugh; with his mouth open and his bony frame shaking.

Lo min finished the knot, and with a flick of her wrist sent the loop spinning through the air, until it dropped neatly over Baal-pteor’s head and shoulders. Even as the rope fell, Lo min pulled hard, tightening the loop about Baal-pteor’s chest and arms, while yanking him so he sprawled across the pillar surface. In an instant Lo min was standing astride him.

“I will tie the other end to myself,” she said. “Now, wizard, which of the three animals shall I instruct Shaggor to catch?”

**The End**

## **Fantasy Low - part 1**

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### **Instructions**

Please read the Introduction and First Part of the Story and then answer the questions that follow. You will need to read carefully.

### **Introduction**

In which Lo min learns to fly.

Lo min and Shaggor are on an almost impossible quest to rescue Lo min’s sister from the inaccessible Mountain Palace. Lo min is a warrior monk. Shaggor is an adventurer who is betrothed to Lo min’s sister. Out of necessity they have joined forces.

In this adventure, they are trying to obtain a spell of flying to aid in their quest to reach the Mountain Palace.

### **First Part of the Story**

In the wind-blasted scrub-land that edges the desert, among the ruins of a once great city, a solitary pillar stood: A pillar of red rock so enormous as to suggest it was once part of a structure built for

creatures beyond human dimensions. A dotted-line of spikes crawled up the pillar to its very summit.

Near to the pillar base, in the shade of a stunted gulabaa tree, stood Lo min and Shaggor.

Shaggor, feet apart, arms akimbo, chin tilted upwards, surveyed the pillar as if it were a personal opponent.

“Behold Baal-pteor’s Column!” he proclaimed.

Lo min stared at the pillar. It had been three years since she had attempted a serious climb.

“It is a long and arduous ascent.” Shaggor raised a hand to illustrate. “And an equally lengthy but easy drop in the other direction.” He slapped the hand down into his palm. “Those spikes driven into the pillar seem real enough, don’t they?”

“They do.”

“Ascending, they are as visible and solid as this blade.” To illustrate his point Shaggor drew his dagger and waved it around. “Yet, if you try to descend...” Shaggor’s hands fluttered around the knife and it vanished.

“You are a wizard!”

“Unfortunately not,” remarked Shaggor, plucking the dagger from his sleeve and re-sheathing it. “So, the only ways down from the wizard’s pillar are by flying or falling. Regard that white shape, beside the clump of dhurugrass: a human skull bleached by the sun and gnawed on by wintibirri -- no doubt, a previous student of flight.”

“It is a long fall,” Lo min commented.

She unslung her pack and pulled out a length of rope. Shaggor watched her.

“We do not need a rope to climb up, and it is too short to aid our descent.”

“Where I come from, a careful traveler always carries rope.” Her father had ventured out without a rope three years ago, and fallen down a cliff. “We tie ourselves together and then...”

“No thank you. A poor climber like myself needs to keep it simple. Where I come from, we always carry a sword. It is bad luck not to.”

He started to tie his scabbard and sword across his shoulders.

“Remember, Baal-pteor cannot be harmed by weapons wielded by human hand,” said Lo min. “And it is a tricky climb.”

Once again, Shaggor studied the pillar, then with evident reluctance, abandoned the sword.

## Romance RHigh - part 1

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### Instructions

Please read the Introduction and First Part of the Story and then answer the questions that follow. You will need to read carefully.

### Introduction

Wendy has fallen for Seb. However, Wendy believes Seb is unaware of her existence. Then fate presents her with the chance to attract his attention -- she is invited to give a speech as maid of honour at a wedding where he is the best man. Wendy is sitting with her sister, Shay, who is emceeing the event.

Wendy thinks careful preparation is the key to making the speech a success. Shay is determined that Wendy should take a more adventurous approach.

### First Part of the Story

Wendy sat at the head table, fiddling with twelve, small, white cards, while she waited for her turn to speak. Above her, two majestic peaks of the wedding marquee rose into the night, while in front, arrayed across the neatly clipped grass, she was confronted by table after table of people. These wedding guests were silent, all turned to one standing speaker, dressed as a Scottish highlander. He was a large man with a powerful voice, and big, confident gestures. To Wendy, Seb looked like an ancient chieftain addressing his clan.

“What a cynical PR job,” said Shay out of the corner of her mouth. “Almost makes the groom sound human.”

“Nothing wrong with sticking up for someone.” Wendy noticed her chest felt tight as she spoke.

“I suppose Seb has to be nice about his brother.”

“Step-brother.”

Seb’s speech was convincing, she thought, maybe she had been wrong about Grantie. The crowd laughed, turning to each other to share their appreciation of Seb’s joke, while Wendy, who had missed the punchline, forced a smile.

She said: “Seb likes a woman with a sense of humour. His late wife was a comedian.”

“And now you’re planning to bring laughter back into his life,” said Shay.

Seb finished, and the crowd applauded loudly. Wendy clapped particularly enthusiastically, but Seb sat down without looking at her. Shay leapt up, microphone in hand, to attend to her emceeing duties. Wendy was close enough to study Shay’s eyes – big pupils, slightly unfocused. She was trashed, though otherwise you wouldn’t know it – her movements were smooth and her words

crystal clear. Shay could be a difficult customer when she was trashed.

"I do have a good sense of humour," Wendy explained to Shay as she sat down. "But not improvised. I have to write it down. And what's a speech but something written and then read aloud?"

"Sounds riveting."

"It will be riveting. And humorous."

Wendy was very aware that the next speech on the program was hers. She looked down at the deck of precious cards in her hands. Each was meticulously numbered, and had a series of points, in small, neat handwriting.

"Don't tell me you've written the whole thing down?" said Shay. "Why would you do that?"

"For the reason that I've just said. Plus, you know I'm one of those people who fear public speaking more than death."

Shay rolled her eyes.

Wendy said: "In my mind, this is going to be the world's worst wedding speech!"

"In my mind too."

Wendy's tongue felt thick and her mouth dry. On the snowy tablecloth in front of her was a glass of chardonnay. She put down her cards, reached for her glass and took a gulp. The wine was cool and slipped down easily.

"I worry about my mind going blank. That's why I need the cards."

"You need to drink up and get a grip." Shay refilled Wendy's glass. "I know what you're like with a few drinks inside -- you can't help yourself. You have to put on a performance. Remember that bit you did about the husband-to-be; where you cleverly changed his name from Grantie to Gruntie."

Wendy shook her head as if she had no memory of this.

"You did this whole Gruntie bit, when you were trashed. And that was to a whole bar full of people."

Shay illustrated this by using her forefinger to push up her nose, and making oinking noises.

"Don't do that!"

"I'm not saying your performance was subtle. But it was very funny. Funny because it was true."

"Don't say that!"

"And you weren't reading cue cards."



Wendy made a show of studying her cards.

“This is typical Wendy. Take the safe approach. Has that been working with Seb ? Is anything short of a finger in his face going to get his attention now? If I was really your friend...” Shay trailed off with a snort of frustration.

Wendy placed her cards precisely in front of her and picked up her wine glass. “How long before I’m on?”

Shay ignored her. A minute later the Bride and Groom reappeared at the bridal table. Wendy noticed that Grantie had spilled food on his tie. Fiona beamed at her Maid of Honour. Grantie smirked at Wendy.

“Looking forward to your speech, Wends. Hope you're going to take it easy on me.”

Wendy nodded grimly. She watched Grantie and Fiona sit down along from her. Other wedding guests were beginning to return to their seats -- it was only a matter of time now.

### **Comp\_check\_R\_Stage1**

Please answer the 3 questions below about the passage you have just read.

On what did Wendy write her speech?

- Napkin/serviette
- Tablet computer
- Cards

What was Wendy's role at the wedding?

- Bride
- Emcee
- Maid of honour

What animal impression has Wendy done in the past?

- Pig
- Monkey
- Wombat

### **Romance - part 2**

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### **End of the Story**

Wendy reached for her cards. They were gone. Frantically, she searched the table.

“Looking for something?” asked Shay.

“I can’t find my cards.”

“I’ve hidden them.”

Wendy frowned at her. “Why would you do that? Oh, what does it matter? Can I just have them back?”

A card appeared in Shay’s hand. “Here’s one. By the number in the corner, from somewhere in the middle of the speech.”

She read the card with exaggerated nodding and facial expressions.

“Not funny,” was Shay’s verdict.

She looked up at Wendy with her unfocused eyes, and said: “This is no time for bullshit half-measures.”

Wendy watched with disbelief as Shay held the card in both hands, elbows up, as if about to tear it in two.

“You wouldn’t.”

Slowly, Shay ripped the card in two. Wendy let her breath out in a slow, hissed, expletive. Shay proceeded to shred the card into tiny pieces, which she gathered up in the palm of her hand and tossed in front of Wendy.

“Confetti,” she said.

“You are insane!”

Grantie called down from along the table, his voice muffled slightly by the food in his mouth.

“Probably a good idea to start the speech soon, Wends!”

“Just a couple more minutes!” Shay called back with a cheerful wave.

To Wendy, the air in the marquee seemed very thin. Shay leaned closer, so Wendy could feel her breath on her ear.

“For your own good,” said Shay.

“Please!”

“Okay, no more confetti.”

Shay held the cards aloft as if to hand them back, but then, to Wendy’s horror, she began to bang on her empty wine glass with a fork. The crowd fell silent.

“In a moment,” announced Shay, “it will be my pleasure, to call on the maid of honour, Wendy Wells, to say a few words.”

Wendy felt every eye turn to her. Desperately, she tried to look composed, but she noticed her hands beginning to shake.

“I had a look at her speech notes just now...”

Shay held up the precious cards. Wendy’s eyes were riveted to them. She felt a hot flush explode over her face.

“...and I’m afraid I’m going to have to make some adjustments.”

Shay pretended to read one of the cards, while theatrically shaking her head.

“You can’t say that about Fiona!”

With a flick of her wrist, Shay sent the card spinning across the tent. There was laughter and applause.

“And you really can’t imply Grantie did that!”

Another card followed, then another, and another, until they were all gone. Through all this Wendy sat, unable to breath properly, but with her smile muscles contracting painfully. A strange sense of detachment came over her. The laughter, the clapping, the dressed-up people -- none of it was real. Dimly, she was aware of further applause and that Shay was sitting down. Wendy felt weak, but, almost as if being pulled by outside forces, she rose to her feet. Locking her knees to stop her legs shaking, and holding tight to the table, she looked up. A sea of faces turned towards her. It was quiet. She looked to her left -- there was the way out. She could make a run for it across the grass, through the tent flap, and into the night -- but she could not get her legs to work. Wendy turned back to the faces, and managed to suck down one deep breath.

“Come on brain! Remember!” she said to herself.

“I have known Fiona since I was twelve,” she said, her voice surprisingly strong, “And every year has deepened my appreciation of how completely fabulous she is.” There was a murmur of agreement around the marquee. “I have known Grantie only six months, but even during that short time I have come to realise that...”

Wendy’s mind was blank. Panic surged. And it was then she seemed to lose control of her mouth. As if in a dream, she heard herself say, in a clear and very loud voice: “Who does this remind you of?”

Seemingly unbidden, her forefinger rose to her nose. There followed a series of four oinks. Then a long silence. This silence was eventually broken by one person laughing loudly. And it wasn’t Shay. Seb was leaning back in his chair, eyes closed, rocking with laughter.

**The End**

## Romance RLow - part 1

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### Instructions

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### Introduction

Wendy has fallen for Seb. However, Wendy believes Seb is unaware of her existence. Then fate presents her with the chance to attract his attention -- she is invited to give a speech as maid of honour at a wedding where he is the best man. Wendy is sitting with her sister, Shay, who is emceeing the event.

### First Part of the Story

Wendy sat at the head table, fiddling with twelve, small, white cards, while she waited for her turn to speak. Above her, two majestic peaks of the wedding marquee rose into the night, while in front, arrayed across the neatly clipped grass, she was confronted by table after table of people. These wedding guests were silent, all turned to one standing speaker, dressed as a Scottish highlander. He was a large man with a powerful voice, and big gestures. To Wendy, Seb looked like an ancient chieftain addressing his clan.

“Skilful speech,” said Shay out of the corner of her mouth. “Making the groom sound good. I suppose it’s what you’d expect seeing as it’s his brother.”

“Step-brother,” said Wendy. She noticed her chest felt tight as she spoke.

Seb’s speech was convincing, she thought, maybe she had been wrong about Grantie. The crowd laughed, turning to each other to share their appreciation of Seb’s joke, while Wendy, who had missed the punchline, forced a smile.

She said: “Seb likes a woman with a sense of humour. His late wife was a comedian.”

Seb finished, and the crowd applauded loudly. Wendy clapped particularly enthusiastically, but Seb sat down without looking at her. Shay leapt up, microphone in hand, to attend to her emceeing duties. Wendy was close enough to study Shay’s eyes – big pupils, slightly unfocused. She was trashed, though otherwise you wouldn’t know it – her movements were smooth and her words crystal clear. Shay could be unpredictable when she was trashed.

“I have a good sense of humour,” Wendy explained to Shay as she sat down. “But not improvised. I have to write it down. And what’s a speech but something written and then read aloud?”

Wendy was very aware that the next speech on the program was hers. She looked down at the deck of precious cards in her hands. Each was meticulously numbered, and had a series of points, in small, neat handwriting.

“You’ve written the whole thing down?” said Shay.

“You know I’m one of those people who fear public speaking more than death. In my mind, this is going to be the world’s worst wedding speech!”

Wendy’s tongue felt thick and her mouth dry. On the snowy tablecloth in front of her was a glass of chardonnay. She put down her cards, reached for her glass and took a gulp. The wine was cool and slipped down easily.

“The main thing I worry about is my mind going blank, not remembering what I have to say. That’s where the cards come in.”

“You’re describing stage fright. But when you have a few drinks you’re fine in front of an audience.” Shay refilled Wendy’s glass. “Remember that bit you did about the husband to be? Where you changed his name from Grantie to Gruntie?”

Wendy grimaced -- she wished she could forget the episode.

“You did that whole Gruntie bit, when you’d have a few. And that was to a whole bar full of people.” Shay illustrated this by using her forefinger to push up her nose, and making oinking noises. “I’m not saying your performance was perfect,” Shay continued. “But it was very funny and people laughed.”

“They did,” Wendy conceded.

“So, you don’t need your cards.”

Wendy shrugged.

“You’re taking the safe approach,” said Shay. “It might not work when Seb hasn’t noticed you up to now. If I was in charge of your romantic life...”

Wendy picked up her wine glass.

“How long before I’m on?”

“Whenever the bridal couple get back.”

A minute later, the Bride and Groom reappeared at the bridal table. Wendy noticed that Grantie had spilled food on his tie. Fiona beamed at her Maid of Honour. Grantie smirked at Wendy.

“Looking forward to your speech, Wends. Hope you’re going to take it easy on me.”

Wendy nodded grimly. She watched Grantie and Fiona sit down along from her. Other wedding guests were beginning to return to their seats -- it was only a matter of time now.

**Crime CHigh - part 1**

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### **Instructions**

Please read the Introduction and First Part of the Story and then answer the questions that follow. You will need to read carefully.

### **Introduction**

Ali is a private detective in New Zealand. She is investigating the death of Jian Woo who fell to his death from a cliff. Ali is working on behalf of Lillian Po, a woman Jian had started dating, and who the police suspect is involved in the death. This is Ali's first big case.

Ali is trying to track down Tipene, Lillian's previous boyfriend and an acquaintance of Jian. Ali has been tipped off that Tipene is lying low, close to the cliffs, at Karekare beach, staying with his friend Zac.

It is important to Ali that she is seen as a competent professional. Zac does not view women from this perspective.

### **First Part of the Story**

The road followed the banks of the Karekare Stream, between two rows of wooden holiday bungalows, set into the bush. Pulling over to the side of the road, Ali climbed out of her air-conditioned car into the heat. She shaded her eyes to stare through the thin belt of bush which flanked the stream, to an orange and lime bungalow. Although it was mid-morning, the curtains were drawn.

The door was answered, after prolonged knocking, by a man wearing a towel around his waist. His hair was wet, and water beaded on his exposed skin.

"Sorry, I was having a bath out the back."

The man looked in his mid-twenties, shorter than Ali, but lean and muscular. He wasn't Tipene.

"I'm looking for Tipene."

"Tipene's gone surfing."

The man's gaze travelled lazily up and down Ali. She ignored this and tried to look past him into the house.

"He's not here. You can come in and look if you like. Nice boots by the way."

Ali glanced with disfavour at her borrowed hiking boots. She hadn't been able to decide what to wear on this expedition, and had ended up with an uncoordinated mishmash of beachwear and hiking clothes.

“You’re Zac Smith.” Tipene’s surfing buddy.

Zac smiled and said: “Guilty as charged.”

“I’m Ali Chatfield.” Ali showed him her PI license.

“Nice picture, Alizon. Very serious. Very business-like. And cute way to spell your name.”

“I’ve been hired by the family of Lillian Po to investigate Jian Woo’s death.”

“I’d like to be part of your private investigation, Alizon. Come in and make yourself comfortable.”

“Put some clothes on.”

Zac gave a mock salute and retreated into the house.

“You can leave your boots on,” he said over his shoulder.

Ali stepped through the doorway, finding herself in dimly lit, L-shaped room; a sparsely furnished lounge-kitchen that took up most of the small house. Zac disappeared through a side-door. Ali wandered around a cluttered coffee table to a tatty mustard-coloured couch, which stood against the back wall. She pulled back the curtains above it to let in the morning sun, and sat down. Keeping still, she listened, but she could only hear one person moving around. Zac reappeared wearing board shorts.

“You reckon Tipene was involved, don’t you, Alizon?”

“He didn’t like Jian.”

“But who did?” said Zac, sitting down on the couch next to her. “Always had to win. It made him behave like an arsehole sometimes. Anyway, the real problem with your theory is Tipene has an alibi.”

“He says he was at a Māori performing arts festival.”

“He was. Check this out.”

Zac rummaged around the coffee table and produced a smart-phone. He tapped on the screen until a video appeared, then positioned himself so Ali could see. This involved sliding along the couch so that he was pressing his naked shoulder against her.

Sure enough, there was a group of men performing a haka – a Māori war dance – with a tall, powerfully-built man in front, grimacing and brandishing a carved stick. To Ali, underneath the performance elements, there was a relish about how Tipene threw himself into each intimidating pose.

Zac said: “Jian used to call them Tipene’s male dance troupe.”

Ali said: “The time of death was inexact, and there would be lots of people coming and going at the

festival -- it's not a rock-solid alibi."

"Better than your client's."

Ali shuffled away from Zac as far as the couch allowed.

She said: "So maybe Tipene alibis out. What did you make of the whole set-up? That Jian had a rendezvous with Lillian on the top of the cliff."

Zac looked thoughtful. "Makes sense. He liked to take chicks up high – somewhere which seemed dangerous. His version of the scary movie date. It's an old psychological trick where you get them excited and their brain will be tricked into thinking it's sexual excitement."

"Romantic for them."

"Whatever it took to close the deal. And scattering the petals – that's another signature Jian move."

Ali sighed inwardly. This was the problem of following a trail already covered by the police – witnesses knew the evidence. One of the few findings from the scene investigation was rose petals. She hadn't, however, realized that heights and petals were a notorious part of Jian's seduction routine.

"He got her up there at sunset," said Zac. "Beautiful orange light, petals strewn around, maybe some crappy Chinese love song playing in the background. She comes in close. She leans in and closes her eyes. He closes his eyes expecting a kiss. Instead he gets a little push. Bye-bye Jian!"

"But," wondered Ali, "in that case, what was her motive?" However, that wasn't her job to figure out.

She said: "You didn't like him either."

Zac smirked. "Not enough to meet him for a romantic rendezvous."

Much as the idea of Zac being hauled off by the police appealed to Ali, she was not seriously interested in him as a suspect – he had been in Australia at the time of death.

"And I don't usually wear hairclips," he added.

The hairclip was a problem for Ali. A pink frog hairclip, holding three strands of hair, had also been found at the scene. The clip was an item that Lillian was known to have often worn, and the three strands were indubitably her hair. That, combined with her weak alibi looked very suspicious.

Ali said: "What do you know about the relationship between Tipene and Jian?"

"They were mates."

"Really?"

"They *were* mates." This time Zac stressed the past tense.



“They fell out over Lillian,” said Ali, steering the conversation towards her key concern.

“Maybe. But it could have been lots of things. Tipene can be as bad as Jian sometimes. Jian loved Chinese stick fighting - Nangùn. Used to go on about how good he was. Tipene posted a video of Jian’s routine set to the Village People, and labelled it rhythmic gymnastics. I can show it to you.”

“That’s enough videos. Tipene and Lillian had broken up.”

“Yeah. According to Tipene, he dropped her.”

“You don’t believe him.”

Zac shrugged. “He would say that.”

“He was angry with her.” This was the crucial issue, so Ali kept the delivery of this probe low key.

“Angry enough to plant the petals and the frog-clip?” Zac grinned.

Ali tried to keep the irritation from her face.

Zac said: “From what I could see, there was never much heat in that relationship unless they were split up. He liked the chase. And she liked being chased. I don’t think you can make much of a motive from that.”

Ali didn’t think so either. She stood up.

"You off to the beach? If you tell me where you're going, I can tell Tipene where to look for you."

“Thank you for your time.”

Zac smiled up at her. “Do you like being chased, Alizon?”

She gave him a cold stare. “I don’t like being followed. I’ll see myself out.”

### **Comp\_check\_C\_Stage1**

Please answer the 3 questions below about the passage you have just read.

Where had Zac been at the time of death?

- Austria
- Australia
- South Africa

Whose death is Ali investigating?

- Tipene's
- Lillian's
- Jian's

What was the shape of the hair-clip found at the crime scene?

- Heart shaped

Frog shaped  
Butterfly shaped

## Crime Part 2

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### End of Story

At the top of the Mercer Bay cliffs, Ali leant on the waist-high boundary fence for a few moments, breathing heavily, turning her sweaty face to the cooling sea breeze. Then she surveyed her surroundings. At her back was dense bush, in front the cliff edge and then the ocean. To her right she could see the jagged coastline cut its way northward before flattening into the wide sweep of Muriwai Beach. To the south, she looked over Mercer Bay towards Karekare beach, the broad black sands of Whatipu and on to the Manukau Bar. In the far distance, she could just make out the glistening tip of Mt Taranaki.

Tipene had not been on Karekare beach.

Between the boundary fence and the cliff edge was an uneven surface: exposed rock and meagre grass. This is where the drama had unfolded. Ali was surprised forensics had found any evidence on such an exposed place.

Ali looked about her again, checking she was alone, before climbing over the boundary fence. She stepped to the cliff edge, and peered down. Here the full distance to the crashing surf became apparent -- though Jian had not made it to the sea. The cliffs appeared vertical, but Ali knew that at the base they arced outwards to meet the sea. It would have taken seven or eight seconds for Jian to bounce down the 190 metre cliff face, hitting the bottom at 200 kilometres an hour.

Then, among the crash of the waves and the cicada song from the bush, Ali heard a sound that made her turn -- somebody climbing the fence. A short distance behind her, there now stood a man dressed in a shortie wet suit and sneakers -- Tipene.

He was carrying a satchel and a fluorescent yellow walking stick. Ali watched impassively while Tipene spun the stick in his hands, and, with a powerful thrust, managed to embed it in the rocky ground. Pulling a small camera from his satchel, he attached it to the top, and spent a few moments fiddling with it. Tipene straightened and said: "Smile!"

Ali didn't smile.

Tipene said: "This is a proper place for pictures. It's called Te Ahua o Hinerangi - the image of Hinerangi. Hinerangi was the beautiful woman who threw herself from the cliff. Her spirit went westward towards the sunset, but the wind and sea etched her image on the cliff face. You can see it some days."

"You the local tour guide?"

“You know who I am. I know who you are too.”

Tipped off by Zac, no doubt, thought Ali.

Tipene began to walk towards her. But then he went back, retrieved the camera, and replaced it in the satchel. He approached Ali a second time, stopping a few paces away. Ali watched his face -- the proud eyes, the barely perceptible smile on his lips. She was aware his performance had been designed to intimidate her, but she also sensed that if she maintained her current more dangerous position on the cliff edge, with an outward appearance of nonchalance, she would have the psychological advantage, whatever that was worth.

Ali smiled at Tipene and said: “Do you ever wonder what it would be like to pull off Jian’s trick?” She paused, waiting for the look of puzzlement, then she continued. “A cliff top kiss. Might be the most exciting kiss of your life. If you dare.”

Ali watched Tipene’s eyes narrow, but she believed he would not refuse her challenge. He stepped forward; his eyes locked on hers. Ali tried to keep herself relaxed, as her body sensed both his nearness, and the fatal drop behind her.

She said: “Jian would’ve been on the cliff side.”

Tipene nodded, and they awkwardly shuffled round each other, so that he was between Ali and the cliff edge.

She asked: “You gonna to shut your eyes?”

Tipene stared at her. Then he shut his eyes. As Ali leaned in, she felt his body tense. On her tiptoes, she put her lips next to his ear and whispered: “I don’t believe a word of it.”

She took two quick steps backwards.

Tipene watched her, his posture still taught.

“The whole romantic-cliff-top-meeting-that-ended-in-tragedy theory. It never felt right. I have a different theory: Two competitive young men -- mates. Both skilled in martial arts – one Chinese martial arts; the other Maori martial arts.”

She was sure she saw a slight reaction in Tipene’s eyes.

“Particularly stick fighting. Problem was it felt a bit hollow -- neither involved full contact stick fighting, it was all just theatre. And then they fell out. Maybe it was competing over the same girl. So, they decided to have a real fight, and taking a leaf out of Jian’s seduction manual, they chose to amp up the adrenaline by having it on this cliff top, maybe they even decide to have it at sunset to increase the drama. And then one of them died. An accident in all probability – slipped during the fight.”

The last sentence was a hook – an escape route, or a challenge to his ego. Because Ali had a second theory: if there had been a fight, and Tipene had defeated Jian, he would be dying to boast about it.

Tipene said: “Hard to rule a fight out. The death would have been an accident. Doesn’t mean there wasn’t a clear winner.”

“Hard to prove now, if someone won through skill or just luck.”

“Without video evidence, or something like that.”

To Ali this was as good as telling her there was video evidence.

She said: “Maybe after the fight the survivor found some petals in Jian’s bag, and threw them around to confuse any investigation.”

Tipene stared at her.

“And maybe one or other of them had the frog-clip as a keepsake and it was dropped during the fight.”

Again, Tipene did not respond.

Ali did not believe these ideas about the petals and the hairclip. It seemed more probable they were part of a pre-conceived plan to take revenge on Lillian. Following this line of thinking suggested, that for Tipene, the outcome of the fight had been a foregone conclusion; which began to take Jian’s death away from manslaughter and into pre-meditated murder.

“And now that you know Lillian is in trouble, you might be the sort of man to step up with the truth.”

The tension went out of Tipene, and the almost invisible smile returned to his lips.

“Think about it”, said Ali. “I’ll be in touch.”

She turned and left Tipene, feeling his eyes on her back as she clambered over the fence, and started down the track. She had enough for the moment: a theory which Tipene wasn’t denying; and a camera which might back up that theory with a record of the fight. Even before he had suggested such a video existed, Tipene’s odd behavior towards the camera had made Ali curious, and so she

had devised the kissing scene re-enactment to get close enough to lift the camera from his satchel. Judging she was out of Tipene’s sight, Ali started to run.

**The End**

**Crime CLow - part 1**

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## Instructions

Please read the Introduction and First Part of the Story and then answer the questions that follow. You will need to read carefully.

## Introduction

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Ali is trying to track down Tipene, Lillian's previous boyfriend and an acquaintance of Jian. Ali has been tipped off that Tipene is lying low, close to the cliffs, at Karekare beach, staying with his friend Zac.

## First Part of the Story

The road followed the banks of the Karekare Stream, between two rows of wooden holiday bungalows, set into the bush. Pulling over to the side of the road, Ali climbed out of her air-conditioned car into the heat. She shaded her eyes to stare through the thin belt of bush which flanked the stream, to an orange and lime bungalow.

Although it was mid-morning, the curtains were drawn. The door was answered after prolonged knocking by a man wearing a towel around his waist. His hair was wet, and water beaded on his exposed skin.

"Sorry, I was having a bath out the back."

The man looked in his mid-twenties, shorter than Ali, but lean and muscular. He wasn't Tipene.

"I'm looking for Tipene."

"Tipene's gone surfing."

She tried to look past him into the house.

"You can come in and wait if you like. Leave your boots on."

Ali glanced with disfavour at her borrowed hiking boots. She hadn't been able to decide what to wear on this expedition, and had ended up with an uncoordinated mishmash of beachwear and hiking clothes.

"You're Zac Smith." Tipene's surfing buddy.

Zac nodded.

"I'm Ali Chatfield." Ali showed him her PI license. "I've been hired by Lillian Po to investigate Jian Woo's death."

He said: "I'd be worth talking to. Come in and make yourself comfortable."

"That would be helpful."

"I'll just be a moment," Zac said over his shoulder, as he retreated into the house.

Ali stepped through the doorway, finding herself in dimly lit, L-shaped room; a sparsely furnished lounge-kitchen that took up most of the small house. Zac disappeared through a side-door. Ali wandered around a cluttered coffee table to a tatty mustard-coloured couch, which stood against the back wall. She pulled back the curtains above it to let in the morning sun, and sat down. Keeping still, she listened, but she could only hear one person moving around.

Zac reappeared wearing board shorts and a T-shirt.

He said: "You reckon Tipene was involved, don't you?"

"He didn't like Jian."

"Nobody did," said Zac, sitting down on the couch next to her. "Always had to win. It made him behave like an arsehole sometimes. Anyway, Tipene has an alibi."

"Says he was at a Māori performing arts festival."

"That's right. Check this out."

Zac rummaged around the coffee table and produced a smart-phone. He tapped on the screen until a video appeared, then positioned himself so Ali could see. Sure enough, there was a group of men performing a haka – a Māori war dance – with a tall, powerfully-built man in front, grimacing and brandishing a carved stick. To Ali, underneath the performance elements, there was a relish about how Tipene threw himself into each intimidating pose.

Zac said: "Jian used to call them Tipene's male dance troupe."

Ali said: "The time of death was inexact, and there would be lots of people coming and going at the festival -- it's not a rock-solid alibi."

Though her client's was worse, Ali reflected.

She said: "So Tipene alibis out. What did you make of the whole set-up? That Jian had a rendezvous with Lillian on the top of the cliff?"

Zac looked thoughtful. "Makes sense. He liked to take his dates up high – somewhere which seemed dangerous. His version of the scary movie date."

"Romantic for them."

"For Jian, whatever it took to close the deal. And scattering the petals – that's another signature Jian move."

Ali sighed inwardly. This was the problem of following a trail already covered by the police – witnesses knew the evidence. One of the few findings from the scene investigation was rose petals.

She hadn't, however, realized that heights and petals were a notorious part of Jian's seduction routine.

"He got her up there at sunset," said Zac. "Beautiful orange light, petals strewn around, maybe some crappy Chinese love song playing in the background. She comes in close. She leans in and closes her eyes. He closes his eyes expecting a kiss. Instead he gets a little push."

"But," wondered Ali, "in that case, what was her motive?" However, that wasn't her job to figure out.

She said: "You didn't like him either."

Zac smiled. "Not enough to meet him for a romantic rendezvous."

Ali was not seriously interested in Zac as a suspect – he had been in Australia at the time of death.

"And I don't usually wear hairclips," he added.

The hairclip was a problem for Ali. A pink frog hairclip, holding three strands of hair, had also been found at the scene. It was an item that Lillian was known to have often worn, and the three strands were indubitably her hair. That, combined with her weak alibi looked very suspicious.

Ali said: "What do you know about the relationship between Tipene and Jian?"

"They were mates."

"Really?"

"They *were* mates." This time Zac stressed the past tense.

"They fell out over Lillian," said Ali, steering the conversation towards her key concern.

"Maybe. But it could have been lots of things. Tipene was as bad as Jian sometimes. Jian loved Chinese stick fighting - Nangùn. Used to go on about how good he was. Tipene posted a video of Jian's routine set to the Village People, and labelled it rhythmic gymnastics."

"Tipene and Lillian had broken up."

"Yeah. According to Tipene, he dropped her."

Zac shrugged. "He would say that. "

"He was angry with her."

This was the crucial issue, so Ali kept the delivery of this probe low key.

"Angry enough to plant the petals and the frog-clip?" Zac pulled a face. "From what I could see, there was never much heat in that relationship unless they were split up. He liked the chase. And she liked being chased. I don't think you can make much of a motive from that."

Ali didn't think so either. She stood up.

"You off to the beach? If you tell me where you're going, I can tell Tipene where to look for you."

"Thank you for your time. I'll see myself out."

### Comp\_check\_F\_Stage2

Please answer the 3 questions below about the passage you have just read.

What does Shaggor want to take to the top of the pillar?

- His sword
- A rope
- A skull

Shaggor names two ways of descending the pillar: flying, and what other method?

- By rope
- By falling
- Via the iron spikes

Which of Lo min's relatives has died?

- Father
- Elder brother
- Younger brother

### Mid-story questions\_Stage2

Perceived Story Quality Index

	Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
To what extent is this story <b>entertaining</b> ?	o	o	o	o	o
To what extent is this story <b><u>unemotional</u></b> ?	o	o	o	o	o
To what extent is this story <b>memorable</b> ?	o	o	o	o	o



To what extent is this story <b>unoriginal</b> ?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is this story rich in <b>imagery</b> ?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To what extent is this story <b>engaging</b> ?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

---

### Query for More Story\_Stage2

Would you like to read the rest of the story?

- I would like to read the rest of the story
- I would like to skip to the next section

### Comp\_check\_R\_Stage2

Please answer the 3 questions below about the passage you have just read.

On what did Wendy write her speech?

- Napkin/serviette
- Tablet computer
- Cards

What was Wendy's role at the wedding?

- Bride
- Emcee
- Maid of honour

What animal impression has Wendy done in the past?

- Pig
- Monkey
- Wombat

### Comp\_check\_C\_Stage2

Please answer the 3 questions below about the passage you have just read.

Where had Zac been at the time of death?

- Austria
- Australia
- South Africa

Whose death is Ali investigating?

- Tipene's
- Lillian's
- Jian's

What was the shape of the hair-clip found at the crime scene?

- Heart shaped

Frog shaped  
Butterfly shaped

**Block Debrief**

What do you believe this study is about? Please write your answer in one or two sentences.

What other comments or observations do you have about the study?

**Demographic**

Please answer the following demographic questions:

In which country do you currently reside?

Which gender to you identify with?

Male  
Female  
Diverse/other

What is your age?

**Findings**

Would you like to be sent the results of this study?

Yes  
No

**thanks**

Thank you for your time.

**Appendix C**  
**List of conflict behaviours**

- threaten/warn/confront
- tease/taunt/ridicule/indirect dig/use sarcasm
- argue/disagree
- wheedle/cajole/persuade
- insist/demand/direct/command
- lie or accuse of lying
- correct
- label/blame/moralize/shame/embarrass/reject
- criticize/insult
- dismiss/ignore/change subject/ interrupt
- intrude/make uncomfortable/unsettle/be overfamiliar/be offensive/annoy

## Appendix C

### Comprehension questions

Table A1

*1<sup>st</sup> Comprehension Question Fantasy Story*


---

 What does Shaggor want to take to the top of the pillar?
 

---

- His sword
  - A rope
  - A skull
- 

*Note.* Answer is “His sword”.

Table A2

*2<sup>nd</sup> Comprehension Question Fantasy Story*


---

 Shaggor names two ways of descending the pillar: flying and what other method?
 

---

- By rope
  - By falling
  - Via the iron spikes
- 

*Note.* Answer is “By falling”.

Table A3

*3<sup>rd</sup> Comprehension Question Fantasy Story*


---

 Which of Lo min's relatives has died?
 

---

- Father
  - Elder brother
  - Younger brother
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Father”.

Table A4

*1<sup>st</sup> Comprehension Question Romance Story*


---

 On what did Wendy write her speech?
 

---

- Napkin/serviette
  - Tablet computer
  - Cards
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Cards”.

Table A5

*2<sup>nd</sup> Comprehension Question Romance Story*


---

 What was Wendy's role at the wedding?
 

---

- Bride
  - Emcee
  - Maid of honour
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Maid of honour”.

Table A6

*3<sup>rd</sup> Comprehension Question Romance Story*


---

 What animal impression has Wendy done in the past?
 

---

- 
- Pig
  - Monkey
  - Wombat
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Pig”.

Table A7

*1st Comprehension Question Crime Story*

---

Where had Zac been at the time of death?

---

- Austria
  - Australia
  - South Africa
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Australia”.

Table A8

*2nd Comprehension Question Crime Story*

---

Whose death is Ali investigating?

---

- Tipene’s
  - Lillian’s
  - Jian’s
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Australia”.

Table A9

*3rd Comprehension Question Crime Story*

---

What was the shape of the hair-clip found at the crime scene?

---

- Heart shaped
  - Frog shaped
  - Butterfly shaped
- 

*Note.* Answer is “Frog shaped”.