A story can be divided into two categories: backstory and front story. Front story covers the scenes on the page that are happening in the present and pressing forward. Backstory reflects the influences from the past.

Backstory has two main jobs to fulfill in your story: (1) to reveal important information about the main characters, and (2) to help depict a fully realized story world. A character’s backstory comprises all the data of his history, revealing how he became who he is, and why he acts as he does and thinks as he thinks. It also reveals influences of an era, family history, and world events (such as wars) that affect the story and its inhabitants. Backstory illuminates the origins of behaviors and motives, especially those tied into the main conflict.

Because fiction requires a mighty engine to thrust it ahead—and take the reader along for the ride—backstory, if used incorrectly, can stall a story. A novel with too little backstory can be thin and is likely to be confusing. By the same token, a novel with too much backstory can lack suspense.

So here’s the problem: A constant civil war wages within a fiction writer over the how, how much, and when of slipping in backstory. It must be cleverly inserted so that it’s unobtrusive and allows the front story to press ahead. Perhaps the biggest problem with weaving in backstory revolves around this simple fact:

The reader doesn’t need to know as much as the writer does. If you’ve crafted biographies of your major players, outlined and perhaps sketched your fictional town, you’ll be itching to impart all this detail. Or, if you’ve crafted a complicated history for planet Xenus, complete with a thousand years of wars, interplanetary travel, and ruling dynasties, you’ll long to include it all. Or, if you’re writing a historical novel and have spent months researching Victorian England, you’ll want to pass on all your research notes.

Remember this: The fantasy world of your story will loom larger in your imagination than it will on the page. Some authors can get away with including exhaustive details (these authors are usually under contract with a publisher), but most writers make careful choices about what to reveal and what to leave out.

When deciding when and where to use backstory in your work, it can help to think about what you’re trying to accomplish within a given scene. To do this, however, you need to understand the many functions of backstory.

**What Backstory Can Do for Your Story**

A well-told story is substantive, the opposite of a PowerPoint presentation because it teems with the lives of the characters. Backstory is the means to fill in the gaps, supply a character’s motivation and depth, and clarify how the world works. Let’s take a closer look at four of the most crucial functions backstory can fulfill: (1) raising the stakes, (2) revealing motivations, (3) expressing innermost fears, and (4) revealing obstacles.

1. **Raising the Stakes**

   Something is always at stake in fiction. Not only do readers come to care about the protagonist, they recognize that what’s at stake matters. Every story cannot be depicted as a life-or-death struggle, yet the outcome means happiness or misery, health or disease, peace or discord for the protagonist. And the stakes, which are tied to outcome, always pulse with the potential for disaster. This escalating possibility for doom is essential to create suspense and tension, and, in fact, the protagonist’s life should always be depicted as deliciously precarious. Finally, the outcome of a novel, whatever its genre or plot, must always matter desperately to the protagonist and usually to other characters, particularly the antagonist, as well.
In the film version of Thomas Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs*, which follows the novel closely, we learn that Buffalo Bill has murdered and mutilated his previous victims. When Agent Starling first visits the investigation headquarters, Buffalo Bill’s victims are displayed in graphic crime scene photos so that the reader foresees the horrible fate of his next victim. Thus, when Catherine, the senator’s daughter, is captured, we’re aware of the gruesome torments that await her. Further, because backstory reveals that Buffalo Bill keeps his victims alive for a certain number of days, the stakes are increased because time is running out for Catherine.

*The Dogs of Babel*, by Carolyn Parkhurst, offers an illustration of how to personalize and increase the stakes in a novel. The protagonist, Paul Iverson, changes in a moment when his wife, Lexy, dies under odd circumstances. His grief turns into obsession as he puzzles out the facts of his wife’s death.

Paul’s sanity is what’s at stake in this story. In his own words, he has slipped “off the deep end” and is in danger of losing everything. It appears that Paul is forever marked by Lexy’s death, unable to recover and return to his former life or forge a new one.

Parkhurst uses backstory to contrast Paul’s loving marriage to Lexy with his failed marriage to Maura, his first wife:

… whose voice filled our house like a thick mortar, sealing every crack and corner. Maura, this first wife of mine, spoke so much while saying so little that I sometimes felt as if I were drowning in the heavy paste of her words.

Maura, an anxious, controlling woman, became increasingly hostile until the marriage ended. The introduction of this backstory increases our sympathy for Paul and sharply contrasts his first and second wives:

I met Lexy less than a year later; and I knew from our first conversation that when she talked it was an easy thing, plain and open, with none of the Byzantine turns and traps I found myself caught in when I talked to Maura.

More details told via backstory increase the reader’s empathy for Paul. After Paul meets Lexy at her garage sale, he drives away “with a feeling of laughter caught in my chest. I felt happier than I had felt in a long time.”

Contrasting the two women and marriages works in the story: In fact, whenever you can contrast people, events, or objects in fiction, do so. Maura is angry and obsessive; Lexy is funny, artistic, and whimsical. Anyone who has ever left a relationship with a difficult person and then found a new beloved will understand. But showing Lexy’s personality and her marriage with Paul also raises the stakes because the reader feels Paul’s loss and heartbreak, and is drawn into the mystery of Lexy’s death. This unanswered question looms over the story, causing suspense and worry.

In your own stories, contrast is a powerful tool, as when you describe a character before and after a trauma, or involved in a happy and unhappy relationship. As in Parkhurst’s story, when a stable character becomes unstable, readers worry. Backstory can also reveal that a character has a tendency toward self-destruction, depression, or rash actions, all of which raise the stakes.

2. REVEALING MOTIVATIONS

Motivation provides reasons why characters do the things they do. In fact, almost every action and choice a character makes stems from motivation. Since backstory reflects the influences of the past, it’s also the source for motivations. A protagonist is a person with a burning desire, and backstory reveals where this desire stems from.

One of the great difficulties in providing motivation is making it consistent with the character’s values and personality. Backstory provides a window into how a character came to be who he is. Let’s say you’re writing a story set during the Vietnam War, and your character, Randall, was raised in a small Oklahoma town and was the fourth generation of his family to join the army. He’s idolized his father, a retired army captain who was a tough but loving parent and passed on a code of conduct that stressed honor, loyalty, and serving your country.

Now twenty-two and a sergeant, Randall’s backstory motivates him to believe in his mission as he capably leads his men through the sultry Vietnamese jungle with his nerves straining at every sound. But meanwhile, his girlfriend, Kelly, has joined the anti-war movement and has been writing to him about her new anti-war views. After making love during Randall’s last leave in Hawaii, she suggests they don’t have a future together if he stays in the army.

Meanwhile, the senseless killing of the war, along with the uncertainty, drug use, and persistent heat and craziness is making Randall question everything he learned before he landed so far from home. He wants to be a good soldier like his father, he wants to marry Kelly, but mostly he just wants to get the heck out of Vietnam and put the stench of rotting bodies and napalm behind him. Randall’s
dilemma would not be as dramatic if we didn’t know about his heritage and Kelly and if his past and the present weren’t on a collision course.

It can be helpful to keep a Post-It note near your computer that briefly states your protagonist’s desire, such as “Howard Perry wants to take over the family business,” “Genevieve Sanders wants to escape her painful past,” or, “Michele Bronson wants to have a family.” Use your character’s desire as your North Star, and then ask yourself how you’ve proven this desire through backstory.

3. EXPRESSING INNERMOST FEARS
Backstory also helps define your protagonist’s greatest fears, which naturally play a key role in the overall story. Use your protagonist’s fears as a shorthand method for shaping a story line, and then turn her fear into a looming reality. If Deborah, the protagonist in your suspense novel, is a young single mother whose adorable three-year-old daughter, Bethany, means everything to her, then Bethany’s safety will be jeopardized by a disease, an accident, a child molester, an unstable ex-husband, or a kidnapper.

The backstory reveals why Deborah is raising Bethany on her own (her ex-husband was a violent alcoholic), how tenuous her circumstances are (she works for low wages in a day care center but dreams of having her own day care business), information about the child’s father (he was once arrested for drunk driving with Bethany in her infant seat), and information about why Deborah’s family cannot help. By putting what Deborah loves most in jeopardy, fears are put into play. By validating those fears through backstory, you also raise the stakes.

In Michael Crichton’s Disclosure, for example, the protagonist fears losing his family, career, and security. The story is set in the computer industry in Seattle, where Tom Sanders and his family are living the good life. Tom, an executive at Digicom, is in the midst of a corporate merger and expecting a promotion and a raise. Then the rug is pulled out from under him when his ex-lover, Meredith Johnson, is hired as his boss. Worried about his standing in the company, he agrees to an after-hours meeting with Johnson. But instead of discussing work matters, she makes it clear that she expects to resume their sexual relationship, and threatens to ruin him if he doesn’t acquiesce.

In most stories, backstory explains the main conflict between the antagonist and protagonist, especially if they have met before. In Disclosure, the conflict between Sanders and Johnson would not have been plausible if they hadn’t been former lovers and if her fond memories of their lovemaking didn’t fuel her demands.

As you begin to express your protagonist’s fears through backstory, be sure you have a clear understanding of exactly what those fears are. It can be helpful to create another Post-It that articulates your protagonist’s fears, such as “Howard Perry fears that his younger brother Justin, his father’s favorite, will be awarded the CEO position of the family business although he hasn’t earned it.” Or, “Genevieve Sanders is afraid that her past will always haunt her, especially when her abusive ex-husband moves into town.” Or, “Michele Bronson, thirty-six, is afraid that time is running out on her chances for love and a family.”

4. REVEALING OBSTACLES
In literary and genre fiction, all stories are built around conflict, the mighty engine that keeps the plot simmering. Conflict stems from the obstacles, large and small, placed in each scene, blocking or stalling the protagonist’s progress and desires. Placing obstacles that stem from your protagonist’s backstory ups the ante, because these obstacles will push the protagonist’s buttons.

For example, in a romance novel, readers need to know aspects from the hero’s and heroine’s pasts that will create barriers to love. If the heroine is a widow and her husband, a policeman, died on the job, she’ll vow never to be involved with a man in a dangerous profession again. This means that it’s likely that the hero will be a fireman or involved in some life-threatening profession.

Fiction is a constantly changing world of unease, much of it subtle. Conflict must permeate every aspect of the story, and large and small obstacles are ideal for doing this, with the most potent obstacles having dark tendrils creeping in from the past.