

# Antagonist



## DEFINITION

What is an antagonist? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An antagonist is usually a character who opposes the [protagonist](#) (or main character) of a story, but the antagonist can also be a group of characters, institution, or force against which the protagonist must contend. A simple example of an antagonist is the Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, who opposes and wants to destroy Snow White.

Some additional key details about antagonists:

- Not all stories that have a protagonist necessarily have an antagonist, but an antagonist can't exist without a protagonist.
- The conflict that arises from an antagonist's opposition to a protagonist might not always appear as an explicit confrontation (as it does between the Queen and Snow White). Sometimes, an antagonist might challenge a protagonist in other ways, such as through a competitive rivalry that doesn't involve any violence.
- While the antagonist might frequently be "bad" or "evil," this isn't always the case. Antagonists can be just as complicated as protagonists, with nuanced motivations or beliefs.

## Antagonist Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce antagonist: an-**tag**-uh-nist

## Types of Antagonist

When most people think of an antagonist, they think of a "bad guy," like the villains in superhero movies. But there are actually many different types of antagonist, of which the standard villain is just one.

- **Villain Antagonist:** The villain antagonist is the most common type of antagonist. A character who is a villain antagonist has evil or selfish intentions and wants to stop or hinder the protagonist, who—in a conventional narrative—will likely be "the good guy." The Queen in *Snow White* is a villain protagonist. So are the antagonists in most superhero and action stories. It's important to remember that a villain is simply one type of antagonist, and not all villains are antagonists.
- **Hero Antagonist:** A hero antagonist is a character whose intentions are noble, and their main objective is to stop or obstruct the actions of the protagonist—for whatever reason. If a story contains a villain protagonist, chances are good that there will be a hero antagonist attempting to thwart the villain's plans. The presence of a hero antagonist, however, does not always mean the protagonist must be a villain. Because a hero antagonist

is not very common, it is often used to challenge a reader's assumptions about moral choices or storytelling conventions.

- **Group antagonists:** The antagonist of a story may be a group of people rather than just one person. In a war film, for instance, the antagonist may be an entire country. Or in a movie like *Heathers*, which is a dark comedy about social dynamics in high school, the antagonist is a clique made up of popular girls who are all named Heather (which is why the group is referred to as "the Heathers").
- **Non-human antagonist:** It's possible for a story to have an antagonist that isn't a human (or a group of humans) at all. In *Jaws* for example, the antagonist is a killer shark. In fact, antagonists don't technically even have to be *alive*. In the "disaster film" genre—which takes an impending or ongoing disaster as its main source of conflict—sometimes the natural disasters *themselves* serve as the primary antagonists (such as earthquakes, tidal waves, or an asteroid hitting Earth). Some would even argue that societal customs that thwart a protagonist can be antagonists.
- **Internal antagonist:** Some writers use the term "internal antagonist" to describe a situation in which it is an internal flaw or issue of the protagonist that primarily stands in his or her way. For instance, it's possible to argue that in the Jane Austen novel *Emma* that it is Emma's own confidence in her ability and right to meddle in the lives of others that primarily stands in her way. While there are other characters in the novel who inconvenience Emma in some way, ultimately the conflicts in the novel are driven by Emma's own actions and the obstacles she has to overcome are within herself and not posed by anyone else. That said, some people might object to the term "internal antagonist" and instead argue that a novel like *Emma* actually doesn't have a true antagonist at all and instead just has a [dynamic](#), complicated protagonist.

## Examples of a Complicated Antagonist

There are so many different ways for an antagonist to operate that not every antagonist you encounter will fall into one of the categories described above. Some antagonists might even fall into *more* than one of the categories. One good example of a complicated antagonist is the monster in the novel [Frankenstein](#).

### Complicated Antagonist in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

The narrative of *Frankenstein* is about a man named Victor Frankenstein who creates a monster, which is referred to as the Creature. The Creature ultimately turns against his creator and wrecks Victor's life. But the monster is not a simple villain antagonist. As the novel makes clear, the monster acts as he does because Victor first abandons the monster after creating it, and then refuses to create a companion monster to alleviate the monster's terrible loneliness. The

monster's revenge is to make Victor just as alone, by murdering Victor's loved ones. Further, at one point of the novel the Creature tells Victor his story of being alone after Victor abandoned him—for that portion of the novel, the monster becomes the protagonist of his own story. Over all, Victor is the protagonist of *Frankenstein*: the audience sees the story through Victor's eyes, knowing what Victor knows and understanding the consequences of events by what Victor feels and recounts. The audience sympathizes with Victor. But the audience *also* sympathizes to an extent with the Creature, which becomes a murderous villain out of its own sense of having been dreadfully wronged. The Creature is a villain, but an understandable one, and so it is a complicated antagonist.

## Literary Terms Commonly Confused with Antagonist

There are several closely related terms that are often confused with antagonist, but there are critical differences among them that are important to know in order to better understand how to identify an antagonist.

- **Villain:** A villain is an evil character in a story. Of course, as we now know, not all antagonists are evil or villains. You might hear people use the terms "villain" and "antagonist" interchangeably, but this isn't correct. Villains are often antagonists but not always. In order to locate the antagonist, look for the story's primary conflict and ask where that conflict originated.
- **Foil:** A foil is a character that contrasts with another character in order to better highlight their defining traits. For instance, Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter are two ambitious characters who make drastically different choices in the *Harry Potter* series of books. Harry fights evil, or Lord Voldemort, and Draco joins him—comparing these two characters focuses their good and bad traits. Lord Voldemort is the primary antagonist in this series, although the protagonist, Harry, runs into many other obstacles (including Draco) along the way. While an antagonist will often appear as a foil to the protagonist, this is *not* always the case. A protagonist might have many foils and only one primary antagonist.
- **Antihero:** An antihero is a type of protagonist that might do the right thing, but they often do so for the wrong reasons. The lack most of the conventional hero traits (honesty, courage, integrity, etc) and they tend to be driven by their own self-interest and *not* a desire to behave morally. An antihero might initially look like the villain, and therefore, one might be inclined to believe they're the antagonist, but the key difference is that an antihero will still drive the plot forward and have to overcome obstacles presented by other (antagonistic) forces.

antagonist types: villains, hero antagonists, group antagonists, and "non-human" antagonists, as well as an example of an antagonist who doesn't fit easily into any of these categories.

## Villain Antagonist in *Wonder Woman*

In the 2017 film, *Wonder Woman*, Diana Prince saves an American spy and pilot, Captain Steve Trevor, after he crashes near the hidden island where she and the Amazonian race of warrior women live. After he tells the Amazonians about the destruction happening in the world as a result of World War I, Diana decides to accompany him to the war's front line. She believes it to be Ares—a villain based on the Greek god of war—who is responsible, and that if Ares dies the war will end. It isn't until the very end of the movie that Ares' identity is revealed, and the two characters battle. While Ares has relatively little time on the screen, and there are plenty of other villains in this story, it is clear that Ares' evildoing has been the primary cause of suffering for the protagonist and those she wants to save, which makes Ares the primary villain antagonist in this narrative.

## Hero Antagonist in *Breaking Bad*

The protagonist of the TV series *Breaking Bad* is Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. In order to leave his family on secure financial footing, he begins making and selling the illegal drug known as crystal meth. While White's fundamental desire might be a good one—helping his family—his life of crime quickly spirals out of control, and he becomes the show's villain protagonist. Meanwhile, White's brother-in-law, Hank, is an ambitious and fearless agent for the Drug Enforcement Agency who will go to any length to find a local drug dealer known as Heisenberg (who is actually Walter White). Hank has mostly noble intentions (he wants to keep the public safe), and he continuously foils White's drug-dealing plans, which makes him the hero antagonist.

## Group Antagonist in George Orwell's *1984*

The dystopian novel [1984](#) depicts a political reality in which the present-day Great Britain, called Airstrip One in the novel, is controlled by a system of government called The Party. The country is in perpetual war, surveillance systems watch and control the population's every move with a brigade of Thought Police (who punish individualism), and everyone is constantly manipulated through propaganda. The narrative follows the protagonist Winston as he becomes critical of The Party and begins to keep a journal criticizing it. He begins a surreptitious affair with a woman named Julia after he discovers that she shares some of his feelings. The pair have to be cunning to avoid getting caught by the Thought Police, but eventually, they're discovered through a sting operation and tortured. While the Party in the novel is represented through a character named O'Brien who might be identified as the antagonist of the novel, you could also argue that the true antagonist of the novel is the entire group of The Party because it is the broader faceless party, and



## EXAMPLES

Antagonists can come in many different forms. While all stories have a protagonist, not all stories will have an antagonist (although most will). Below, we've provided an example of each of the four main

not a high-level functionary of the party like O'Brien, that is the pervasive force that impedes Winston.

### Non-Human Antagonist in *Deep Impact*

The premise of the film *Deep Impact* is that a comet is heading for Earth. The narrative mostly follows a young teenage astronomer, who first discovered the comet, but also weaves among other characters and the ways in which they brace for the comet's impact as it hurtles toward the Earth, where it will likely kill everyone. The main conflict is a race against time as scientists, politicians, and the young astronomer try to thwart the disaster. A group of astronauts in outer space are able to break up part of the comet, but not all of it—so the astronauts make the brave decision to crash their ship, along with all its remaining explosives, into the second part of the comet, thus saving Earth from complete destruction. The central tension of the film is created by the comet's path toward Earth, which makes the comet itself an example of a non-human antagonist.

action, which makes a narrative engaging. Conflicts brought about by an antagonist can also test the morals and beliefs of characters, which shows the audience who the main characters really are and what they stand for.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page for Antagonist](#): A brief overview of the term, with some examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition for Antagonist](#): A basic definition.
- **Antagonists on Youtube:**
  - [Protagonist versus Antagonist](#): A short video with a very brief breakdown of the difference between the two terms.
  - [A video](#) that covers ten archetypes of villains and gives examples from film.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

While a protagonist tends to supply a storyline with a person that the audience can identify with or "root for" as they strive to achieve some goal, the antagonist is who or what creates the tension or conflict that makes that goal harder to reach. Without an antagonist, many stories would seem to lack a sense of drama or action, and the protagonist wouldn't face any challenges in reaching their goal. The antagonist agitates or disrupts the protagonist, and therefore introduces conflict to a plot. In a typical narrative this conflict brings about a plot's climax and generally serves as the premise for much of the story's

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

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