

# CHAPTER 8

## Creating a Character

*Part Three: Wants Force Choices*

***“What lies behind us  
and what lies before us  
are tiny matters  
compared to what lies within us.”***

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Characters Must Make a Choice

The major criticism with Stanislavsky and his system, and especially for young actors, is that it can be too cerebral. This means the actors can spend more time thinking and being in their head, than doing and connecting to their partner. And audiences pay to see an actor do something, not think something.

So how do characters do something? Characters must first want something. Wants, Needs, Goals, Verbs, Intentions, Objectives—they are all the same thing. I prefer wants because to me it means that the character and actor have a choice. It also allows the character to be selfish. Depending on the acting system you study, the name can change but the meaning is always the same. As will the outcome; conflict. A character's wants getting in the way of another character's wants will always cause conflict. And audiences want to see conflict! The conflict could be as simple as Wile E. Coyote wanting to eat or as complex as Frodo wanting to save the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings*. For Wile E. Coyote he wants to eat. And in the desert, the Road Runner is the tastiest and best option. Characters must do something to fulfill these wants, which creates drama. After all, the word drama is derived from the Greek word dran, which translates "to do." Whether it is the Super Bowl or two reality show contestants arguing over a rose ceremony on *The Bachelor*, drama is exciting and forces characters to do something to resolve a problem.



© Christian Bertrand/Shutterstock.com

Audiences do not want a quick and easy answer to drama. But they want to see characters struggle and struggle until they are pushed to the point where they make risky choices that eventually lead to a resolution. Resolution that comes too quickly cannot hold an audience's attention. *The Shawshank Redemption* would not be the number one movie on IMDb's list if Andy Dufresne escaped prison and lived the rest of his life in Zihuatanejo after only one year. No! Andy's story is more compelling when we see him struggle and struggle and struggle in prison for 40 years. And Andy wouldn't have received his redemption if he was suddenly released from prison. Andy only receives his "redemption" because he makes the choice to leave prison. His need to escape his life behind bars and the risky choices he makes to do so are what audiences find compelling. When Andy's friend Red is released from prison, there is a certain amount of confusion because Red, at this point in his life, isn't sure he wants to leave or not. He has not made a choice yet. Instead a choice was made for him and his needs are not clear. It isn't until he makes a choice to change his life and join Andy in Zihuatanejo that he is also redeemed.

Wants force characters to make choices. The simplistic way would have a character choose to do nothing. But this is the hero of the story, so they must do something. Characters must make a choice! If the first choice fails, they must make another choice. Stories with limited conflict present few challenges to the characters, so playwrights put characters in situations that force them to make multiple important choices throughout a play.

### Three Steps to Making a Choice

Struggles lead to big wants, and then lead to big choices. But how do characters make choices? Making a choice on stage is a three-step process. William Ball's book *A Sense of Direction: Some Observations on the Art of Directing* explained this perfectly with what he called The Golden Key (Ball 70–92).

Hint: Using verbs that are visual is easier for the actor to recall and play on stage. For example, if you want to bother another character you could express: I want to ANNOY them. But annoy is not specific. Does that mean your character is going to tease or avoid them? And it is certainly not something the actor can visualize. Instead try to express something more visual such as: I want to POKE them. An actor can visualize them self poking another actor. Another example could be: I want to TICKLE them. And the visual nature of the verb can even be used in the physicality of the actor. Both tickle and poke can be annoying depending on the response of the receiver.

**Step 1 An Ongoing Want** (Ball 80)

Actors assign verbs to specific thoughts and choices on stage. The more specific the verb the more specific the character’s choice is.

<b>Thought</b>	<b>Verb</b>
I am frustrated	I want to POKE
I am happy	I want to TICKLE
I am empathetic	I want to BUILD

**Step 2 A Receiver** (Ball 80)

Remember the most important person on stage is your scene partner! Although the verbs are personal thoughts of your character’s wants, make sure your verbs are directed toward a receiver. This forces them into a conflict!

<b>Thought</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Receiver</b>
I am frustrated	I want to POKE	his eye.
I am happy	I want to TICKLE	my niece.
I am empathetic	I want to BUILD	her confidence.

**Step 3 A Desired Response** (Ball 80)

Many actors forget about step 3. This is the desired response from the receiver of the verb. Don’t forget step 3! It is the key to a great performance. Go back to the drawing board if your verb did not get the desired response you wanted. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.

<b>Thought</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Receiver</b>	<b>Desired Response</b>
I am frustrated	I want to POKE	his eye.	He gets frustrated too.
I am happy	I want to TICKLE	my niece.	She is happy too.
I am empathetic	I want to BUILD	her confidence.	She feels great.

**Visual Verbs**

to TICKLE	to DEVOUR	to APPREHEND
to POKE	to IGNITE	to COLLECT
to BUILD	to AWAKEN	to CONDUCT
to PURSUE	to OVERWHELM	to RETREAT
to ERUPT	to ATTACK	to SHOCK
to CARESS	to CONGRATULATE	to CUDDLE
to PERFORM	to WITHDRAW	to SNEAK
to STARTLE	to APPLAUD	to CHASE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### Exercise: Visualize Your Verbs

In Chapter 7 you made a list of things said about your character. Now we need to break the text down even further and look at specific thoughts and choices your character may need to make. What are they hoping to do in the scene? Playwrights put characters on stage for a reason. Now it is time to figure out that reason!

Thought	Visual Verb	Receiver	Desired Response
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____
_____	I want to _____	_____	_____

KH  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

**KH**  
**ALL RIGHTS**  
**RESERVED**

## Exercise: Finding the Rhythm

In the previous exercise you correctly identified the thoughts of your character. You also assigned those thoughts visual verbs. Some thoughts seem to run together because they are attached to one want. But when a want changes or there is a dramatic shift for the character's thought process, this is a beat. Identify the major beats in the scene. Number them first, and then list the thoughts your character has in that beat. Finally identify the reason for the beat change. Usually, this has to do with when your character is not getting the desired response from the receiver of the verb.

Beat #	Verbs in Beat	Reason for Beat Change
--------	---------------	------------------------

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

KH  
ALL RIGHTS  
RESERVED

**KH**  
**ALL RIGHTS**  
**RESERVED**





KH  
ALL RIGHTS  
RESERVED