Writer's Guide to Character Motivation

Jeannie Campbell
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Jeannie Campbell, LMFT
the character therapist™

Motivation is essential in writing fiction. If your character isn’t driven by some need, desire, or fear, then the reader will be at best wary and at worst uninterested in everything the character does.

It’s in motivation that you’ll most likely capture your reader and get them to identify with your character, because a reader might not always identify with the conflict in the story. For example, you’re reading a military suspense novel set in the Iraqi desert. Not many people are familiar with this type of conflict, but we can totally identify with the platoon commander’s desire to achieve something great and the medic’s desire to save lives and the sergeant’s desire to get home to his pregnant wife.

I’m a huge fan of Debra Dixon’s Goal, Motivation and Conflict, affectionately called GMC by those in the industry. If you’ve read this book, then this article will help you fill in and flesh out the “G,” “M,” and “C” columns in Debra’s GMC chart. If you haven’t read this book, you’ll benefit from this article even more. (But get her book!)

By the time you’re done with this Writer’s Guide, my hope is that you’ll have identified your character’s driving motivation and be on the path to actualizing it and helping it reach its fullest potential in your manuscript.

How are we going to do that? By you taking a test…as your character.

The Thematic Apperception Test (developed in 1935 by Henry Murray) is a set of 31 black-and-white picture cards that show human figures in various settings and situations, many
of which evoke powerful emotions. The subject of the test (you as your character) will be shown a card and be asked to tell a story about each card. The story should have a beginning (the events leading up to the picture on the card), a middle (what’s going on in the card), and an end (the outcome of the event shown). The subject would also be asked to share the emotions and thoughts of those portrayed in the pictures. [Note, the following images are copyrighted by H. A. Murray and Leopold Bellak and were gleaned from an internet image search. I do not purport to own these images.]

Let’s give it a whirl, shall we?

As your character, take a look at the following picture cards on each page, one at a time. Take your time and fill in the blanks provided with spontaneous stories that emerge out of your character’s psyche, culture, and background. The answers don’t have to be long or overly detailed.

Ready? Here goes.
Card 1:

1. **What is going on in this picture?**

2. **What led up to this happening?**

3. **What will happen to these people?**

4. **What are the people thinking?**

5. **What are they feeling?**
Card 2:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to these people?

4. What are the people thinking?

5. What are they feeling?
Card 3:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to these people?

4. What are the people thinking?

5. What are they feeling?
Card 4:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to this person?

4. What is the person thinking?

5. What is the person feeling?
Card 5:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to these people?

4. What are the people thinking?

5. What are they feeling?
Card 6:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to these people?

4. What are the people thinking?

5. What are they feeling?
Card 7:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to these people?

4. What are the people thinking?

5. What are they feeling?
Card 8:

1. **What is going on in this picture?**

2. **What led up to this happening?**

3. **What will happen to this person?**

4. **What is this person thinking?**

5. **What is this person feeling?**
Card 9:

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen to these people?

4. What are the people thinking?

5. What are they feeling?
Card 10

1. What is going on in this picture?

2. What led up to this happening?

3. What will happen?

4. What is being thought?

5. What is being felt?
Analyzing Your Answers

I bet that last card surprised you, but there actually is a blank card in the test. Usually, a subject is given between 10 and 14 of the cards during an administration of the test, so your character (and you) got off easy.

Now what do you do with your character’s answers? I hope your ready for some self—uh, I mean character—analysis. There is no “score” for the TAT. In fact, that’s one of the limiting features of the test. But it is the oldest projective test being used, and is considered more valid than Rorschach’s Ink Blot test.

A projective test is designed to let a person “free respond” to ambiguous stimuli for the purpose of revealing hidden emotions, internal conflicts, and personal motivations. Instead of an objective test, which measures responses against a bank of standardized data, a projective test is content analyzed for meaning.

The stories that your character created (via you as the author) are thought to reveal attitudes, inner conflicts, and views necessary to determining their motivating Need, because the answers will have that Need projected into them.

Say what? I’ll break it down. If you are confronted with the picture of an ambiguous social situation, as all of the above cards are, and required to interpret it, you are very likely to reveal your own personality in the process. So let’s hope that you, as the author, are adequately self-differentiated from your character, or you’ll be analyzing yourself. 😊 Even though that is
tongue-in-cheek, most—if not every one—of the ten stories have bits and pieces of you as the
author imbedded into it. It’s the same for our fictional manuscripts as well, so just roll with it.

You’ll need to look over all your answers to the questions to see if there are any trends
that seem to point in the same general direction. Since you had your character answer the
questions stream of conscious, they projected their unconscious attitudes and motivations into
their evaluation of the picture, which is what makes the TAT a “projective test.”

For now, I just want you to have a general idea of what your character mainly disclosed.
You might uncover a relationship trend in the answers, or a “climbing the corporate ladder”
trend. Perhaps the answers are skewed negatively or positively. Out of the 10 cards, your
classic will hopefully be solidified enough to give you an impression of his or her mental and
emotional state.

Now on to the meat of this Writer’s Guide.

I want to propose that no matter how varied your character’s answers, or how much you might be
scratching your head and wondering what the purpose of answering all those questions was, you
will be able to narrow down your character’s motivational Need into one of three
categories:

1. Need for Power
2. Need for Affiliation
3. Need for Achievement

This is really good news for writers, as it will make pinpointing that overarching motivating
Need of your characters fairly easy. Hey—you’ve got at least a 33% chance of being right! 😊
I wish I could take credit for this, but alas, I cannot. Psychologist David McClelland developed a theory of human motivation in 1961 called the Learned Needs Theory. In essence, he posited that human beings have three types of motivating Needs, listed above, which are acquired over time and shaped by experience and cultural background.

There are other motivation theories out there for sure, many espousing more needs than just three, but after conducting some research, I believe that all needs essentially boil down to these three. In case you don’t believe me, let me make my argument.

For example, McClelland’s theory was based in large part from that of Henry Murray’s theory that humans had 27 needs on an unconscious level. Murray’s list of needs was one of the larger lists available, which is why I selected it for comparison. The following is a list of 24 of his identified needs, since three of the needs overlap from his theory and McClelland’s.

Here are Murray’s needs grouped into McClelland’s categories. I’ll give any perceived explanation in green after the definition in red.

**Power**
Acquisition – obtain possessions.
Aggression – to injure others. This keeps the intimidation factor favored by those at the top.
Autonomy – to stand alone. It’s lonely at the top.
Contrariance – to be unique.
Exhibition – to attraction attention. When you’ve got attention, you hold sway.
Harmavoidance – to avoid pain. Goes with injuring others and wanting to avoid it yourself.
Rejection – to exclude another. Goes with Autonomy.

**Affiliation**
Counteraction – to defend honor. Most commonly used in the defense of others.
Deference – to serve/follow a superior. Service is another way of staying connected to someone.
Nurturance – to protect the helpless.
Play – to relieve tension/have fun/relax. Who do you play with but your friends?
Sex – to form/enjoy an erotic relationship.
Sentience – to enjoy sensuous impressions.
Similance – to seek empathy. This can only been done by others to the seekers
Succorance – to seek protection/sympathy. Same as above.
Achievement
Abasement – to surrender/accept punishment.
Blameavoidance – avoid blame/obey the rules. This is how you reach achievement.
Construction – to build/create.
Defendence – to justify actions. This can be in justification of a needed course of action.
Exposition – to provide information/educate. The more you achieve, the better you are at this.
Infavoidance – to avoid failure/shame/conceal a weakness.
Order – to arrange/organize/be precise. Cleanliness is next to godliness.
Recognition – to gain approval/social status.
Understanding – to analyze and experience/seek knowledge. Similar to Exposition.

So you can see how these needs really can be condensed to the three Needs I’ll be expounding on in the rest of this article.

Let’s go through each of the three identified Needs in more detail.

The Need for Power (N-Pow)

If a person has a high need for power (N-Pow), they have a need to make an impact using influence and control. They are most satisfied when their environment and surroundings move in a direction due to their direct involvement. This Need could find roots in the person's workplace, church, government, or military.
These people are usually good speakers and like to be at the center of attention. They are demanding in nature, competitive, and ambitious in life. They aren't concerned with getting recognition or approval from others. They just want people to agree with them and comply with them, as those actions from others will meet their power need. People skills, compassion, and flexibility might not be their forte, yet many high N-Pows are the heads of large corporations.

N-Pow can be expressed in two ways:

1) SOCIAL

Social power is also called institutional power. These people want to further the efforts of the organization they work for, root for, or invest in. They want to direct the efforts of their team, whether financial gurus, cheerleaders, or powerhouse companies, to achieve a greater good.

They want their efforts to be effective and tasks to be accomplished, so they seek the upper level management positions as a way to accomplish this, not because they want to contribute to their status and gain. These individuals are hesitant to abuse their power. They are less narcissistic and welcome consultation and advice. They don't stockpile status symbols to flash about.

A good example of social power would be Nelson Mandela. He gained great political power, but used that influence to bring to light some unacceptable social problems and further his great desire for peace and equality on earth. He could have used his power just for his own gain and gratification, but he furthered an ideal for the greater good.
2) PERSONAL

Personal power isn't viewed by others to be as desirable as social power. Why? Because a person seeking personal power wants control over people. They aren't necessarily interested in a greater good. They are after their own goals and just want to have power over others to meet those goals.

They aren't as concerned with being effective or making a difference, so they might not make the best managers or CEOs. They typically have less self-control and might exercise their power impulsively. They might be rude, manipulative, and drive about town in fancy cars and $3k suits. They want the people under them to be loyal to them, not the organization.

It might be important for you to note that men with a high N-Pow express their motives in different ways from women with high N-Pows. Men typically show higher levels of aggression. They are more susceptible to drinking heavily, participating in competitive sports, and being sexually exploitative. Women tend to channel their N-Pow in more socially acceptable ways, like being responsible, caring, and concerned. They might want to reign over the local Parent-Teacher Association or head up committees at church.
The Need for Affiliation (N-Affil)

This second category deals with the people who are social by nature. Affiliation can be defined as a positive, sometimes intimate, personal relationship. These are the people who love being a part of a group and are friendly to others. They crave human interaction and want to be liked by everyone they meet. It drives them crazy when someone dislikes them and they don't know why.

They always want to be in harmony with others, so as a result, can often be conformist and reluctant to stand out. These are not competitive people. Most likely, they stick with whatever norms have been established by whatever group of which they are a part. They want approval, rather than recognition, and it's that approval which motivates them the most.

High N-Affil individuals prefer work that provides significant personal interaction. They perform well in customer service and client interaction situations and do best in a cooperative, cohesive environment where they can be a supportive team player. They often make poor managers or leaders because their ability to be objective is impaired by their high need to be popular and liked. A person with High N-Affil placed in a leadership role might avoid making unpopular decisions, permit exceptions to rules, and show favoritism to friends.

Some situations bring out the N-Affil greater than others. For example, take the weeks and months following the 9-11 attack on the World Trade Center. Americans put their differences aside and came together in a time of great distress. In general, situations that lead to
fear cause people to want to be together, as well as events of high stress.

It should be noted that people who are high N-Affil don't necessarily have to be with other people all the time. Ideally, they strive for just the right balance between time to their self and time spent with others. If that balance isn't being met satisfactorily, then the person will be more motivated to adjust it one way or the other.

If you know someone who would blow off studying for an exam because they value a relationship more than the grade, they are likely High N-Affil. If you know someone who is uncomfortable socializing with others—minus close friends and family, perhaps—then they are low N-Affil.
The Need for Achievement (N-Ach)

People with High N-Ach want to excel at what they do and succeed at what they plan. They will go-Go-GO until they reach the top. They are driven by the challenge of success and the fear of failure. They want to win, master skill sets, be in control, and set new records. They want to "boldly go where no one has gone before."

They don't need praise or recognition of a job well done. Most likely they prefer to work alone or with other high N-Ach people. If they do work with others, they want a high degree of independence. (They absolutely do not like micromanagers!)

They need constant, specific feedback for them to judge where they are in their progress of meeting their own goals. This feedback ultimately should include advancing up the corporate ladder, with appropriate raises and bonuses. But let me be clear: it's not about the money. It's the achievement of making more money, where the money becomes a symbol of their progress.

They usually set realistic goals that are challenging and always—always—taking them in a forward direction. They are a big believer in calculated risks, preferring neither low-risk situations or high-risk situations. Here's why: a low-risk situation where success is easily achieved is not genuine achievement. If anyone could do it, that would nullify their sense of gain. A high-risk situation could mean success is more a game of chance (low internal locus of
control) than the result of the N-Ach's own effort (high internal locus of control). It also carries a chance of failure, which N-Ach's avoid at all costs.

They might have too high of expectations of others, expecting them to be high N-Ach, as well, which could be problematic for them. They might think of people with low N-Ach as being slackers—content to get by with the bare minimum—or reckless cavaliers, choosing high-risk situations where failure would be expected and/or guaranteed.

People with high N-Ach might have parents who encouraged independence in childhood and gave out praise and rewards for success. Positive feelings were associated with achievement (as well as the reverse), so that might help you with compiling realistic back stories for these types of characters.
How to Determine Your Character’s Motivating Need

Every character should have a Need hierarchy. Of the three motivating Needs we just discussed, your character might present with high N-Pow, moderate N-Ach, and low N-Affil. There is any number of possible combinations.

You might be wishing you’d just taken a multiple-choice test after which you could look at your answers, rank each question with a number, add up the score and KAPOW! Your character’s motivating Need served up on a platter. But projective tests don’t work that way.

Let’s revisit card #9, the picture of a man and woman, the man with his face turned away. Here it is again:

I’ll give you two sample answers to this card so you can get a feel for the kind of analysis needed for your character’s responses to all the cards.
Character A’s and Character B’s responses to the questions are below in their respective colors. You’ll notice I didn’t wax eloquently with these answers. Just straight forward sentences, mainly.

1. What is going on in this picture?
"This is a married couple who just had a fight." “These are two coworkers and the man is mad because the woman got a promotion he wanted.”

2. What led up to this happening?
“She caught him cheating with her best friend.” “The man believes that the woman got his promotion because she slept with the boss.”

3. What will happen?
“They will probably get a divorce.” “The man will do everything he can to sabotage the woman in her new job.”

4. What is being thought?
“The husband thinks his straying is directly the wife’s fault. He was driven to another woman because she was too prudish. The wife is wondering how long this has been going on and hoping it’s not as long as she fears.” “The man thinks less of his boss for being so weak as to be swayed by a skirt. He knows his work is better than hers. The woman is gloating.”

5. What is being felt?
“The wife feels betrayed by both her husband and her best friend, but is oddly more disturbed about losing her best friend than her husband. The husband is aggravated to be discovered and he’s disgust by his wife’s pitiful crying.” “The man feels his work hasn’t been properly acknowledged and rewarded. He also believes all those hours on the golf course sucking up to the boss to be wasted.”

Here are two short, non-convoluted stories to analyze, both of which clearly reveal a need tendency (which I did on purpose).

Let’s look at Character A’s story. The character mentioned the association between the two people as intimate--"a married couple." The character further mentioned that they had a fight, and what's a fight, but a barrier to connection? Furthermore, the best friend factor was
brought it, and the betrayal that ensues from her sleeping with her husband. Themes are betrayal, angst, marriage… What’s your best guess for Character A’s Need?

Hopefully you guessed **Character A is high Need for Affiliation.**

What about Character B? Right off the bat, the character mentions that the man in the picture felt he deserved a job promotion. Very likely, were I to pry, this character probably got overlooked for a promotion himself, and was quick to project that experience into the picture. Character B felt that the woman advanced unfairly up the corporate ladder and that his own work went unrecognized. Themes in the story are advancement, recognition… What’s your best guess for Character B’s Need?

Hopefully you guessed **Character B is high on Need for Achievement.**

(The bit I threw in there about the man wanting to sabotage the women was to indicate perhaps a minor Need for Power, as that’s very much something a corporate high-roller might try to do.)

After this sample analysis of Character A and Character B, I strongly advise you to take a minute or two or ten and analyze your 10 story answers again. Some of the stories won’t really scream out a Need as loudly as my two examples did. I was just trying to give you an idea of how it could be. Since you’ve got 10 cards…that’s 10 stories to analyze. Remember, you’re not looking at each specific story by itself. The TAT is comprehensive in its content analysis—so look at all 10 stories to develop an idea of which Need your character has projected *the most* into their answers.
Let’s do one more example before you go at it on your own. I’m going to go with a particularly odd card in the bunch, Card #8.

Here it is again:

![Card Image]

This is seriously creepy to me, and probably to you as well. It’s a good example of the ambiguous nature of the cards, though. It’s not really sure what’s in the guy’s hand, for instance. It could be a cross, or a knife…maybe even a candle. I think it’s pretty obvious that he’s in a cemetery, but then again, perhaps I’m just projecting life experiences of my own into the card, as I went through the death of my father-in-law recently.

Someone could say that this is a company executive standing over the grave of his major competitor, gloating. Or you could say that this is a grief-ridden husband, standing over his wife’s grave, ready to commit suicide to be with her. Or maybe this is a priest, giving the last rites post-mortem to a parishioner who passed away.
In each of the three very different examples I just gave, a Need is apparent. The company executive is N-Pow (lording his status even over the dead body of his rival), the husband is N-Affil (willing to kill himself to be reunited with his love), and the priest is N-Ach (wanting to provide excellent pastoral service to one of his flock).

You might have to think a bit about what the character’s projection of their Need is through the five questions for each card, but with a little practice, you’ll be able to it just as I have done above. At this part in the game, though, after analyzing your character’s answers once again to plumb the depths and read behind the lines, you should see a Need trend emerge: either Power, Affiliation, or Achievement.

Let’s return to a simplified version of Debra Dixon’s GMC chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name:</th>
<th>External</th>
<th>Internal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I want to help you get a head start on filling this chart out. The whole reason for doing my worksheet exercises on Needs is this: Needs affect a person's behaviors because they act in such a way as to meet those needs—it is their prime motivator.

So the “M” column should be easy to fill out. Motivation is individual expression of Need. Of course, you don’t write N-Affil in the column, but your character’s reason for being N-Affil. Did he move around a lot in a military family, making friends a hot commodity? Maybe she witnessed an old couple holding hands in the theater and that kind of forever connection became the beat of her heart?
The “G” column should also be fairly easy to fill out at this juncture. **Goals are the expressions or results of Need.** Some version of the Need should be in one or both of the “Goal” columns. Sticking with my N-Affil character example in the paragraph above, perhaps his goal could be to stay in his horrible job no matter what because he doesn’t want to put his kids through another move like he had to go through in his military family. The goal of staying in the job is a direct result of his high N-Affil Need, which would then go right under his “Motivation” column.

After you nail the “Goal” and “Motivation,” the fun part happens: you develop barriers (plot points) to thwart your character from fulfilling that Need. This is McClelland’s theory helping you filling out the “Conflict” column for Debra Dixon’s *GMC!* **Conflict is the barrier to meeting the Need.**

Knowing your character’s overarching Need will help you determine how that character will act and react to various roadblocks you put in their way in order to ratchet up the tension. For example, if you’ve got a high N-Ach hero, you could pair him with a high N-Affil heroine. She won’t stroke him the way he needs and he won’t be as emotionally available as she wants.

I hope that you’ll be able to use this Writer’s Guide over and over for your characters to help determine their inner/outer motivations based on their motivating Need. Good luck to you in your writing endeavors, and thank you for supporting **the character therapist™** through purchasing this Writer’s Guide!

Blessings,

Jeannie