
ASSERTIVENESS FOR FICTION WRITERS

INTRODUCTION

Assertiveness is a skill that many people understand, but one that can be difficult to fully utilize in every situation. Aside from it being a practical skill that can be used in everyday life, it can be beneficial for fiction writers to know it more intimately because it serves as valuable insight when generating believable character interactions and dialogue in literature. This publication is meant to define, outline the mechanics of, and provide a few tips on how to be assertive, and discuss its possible use in the art of story.

THE REASON FOR ASSERTION

To understand the concept of assertion, one must first understand basic needs, wants, and rights within a civilized society and how they generate a need for it.

BASIC NEEDS & WANTS

A *basic need* is anything that is considered an essential component of a healthy life (i.e. food and water, shelter/security, privacy, social interactions, etc.), while a *want* is something that is desired, but not exactly necessary (i.e. television, candy, flowers, etc.). Basic needs are often the basis of basic rights.

BASIC RIGHTS

A *basic right* is anything one considers all people entitled to be, have, or do by virtue of being part of a social group. Here is a list of some of the basic rights we, as humans, have the privilege of sharing:

1. The right to have rights
2. The right to be left alone
3. The right to be independent
4. The right to be successful
5. The right to be heard and taken seriously
6. The right to receive what one pays for
7. The right to refuse requests
8. The right to ask for what you want
9. The right to make mistakes
10. The right to not assert oneself

USE IN WRITING

Often in fictional literature, there are strange and fantastical sentient beings that have their own unique civilizations and cultures, so it follows naturally that such societies would have needs, wants, and rights of their own, dependent on what is required for them to function “healthily”, whatever that may mean to such beings.

Example:

The fish-people started protesting at public beaches and the banks of our coastal cities after a well-known cruise-liner started dumping sewage into the water above Goro'mish, their underwater capital.

Consider putting thought into these underlying mechanics as they can play a significant role in the dynamics of your worlds and help to draw out the deeper conflicts the readers encounter. When someone violates another's right, resulting in that person not being able to meet a need, a conflict arises. Once conflict ensues, there are several approaches that can be taken to resolve it, the healthiest and most constructive being assertiveness.

NON-ASSERTION

It may be useful to express what assertion *is* by showing what assertion *isn't*. In essence, assertion is the balancing point between two non-assertive poles: passivity and aggression. Let us take a look at the more destructive approaches to conflict resolution.

Typically, people that are *non-assertive*:

- Either feel they have very little self-worth (passivity), or have inflated their self-worth as a defensive reaction to a fear of feeling inadequate (aggression)
- Experience physiological discomfort due to social anxieties
- Struggle with social interactions as a result

PASSIVITY

Passivity is where one allows others to violate one's own rights while respecting those of others. This arises when self-worth is suppressed due to delusions

of personal worthlessness. Passivity is exclusively self-destructive.

Passive people:

- Avoid problems, hoping they will “solve themselves”
- Will agree with others or readily put themselves down to avoid conflict
- View their own thoughts, feelings, or beliefs as less important than those of others
- May be dishonest
- May have a “whatever” attitude (e.g. “who cares?”, “it doesn’t bother me”, etc.)
- Uses indirect reasoning to express what is bothering them
- Complains or whines to others instead of the person that needs to hear the complaint
- Blames and accuses others

The consequences of using passivity are:

- You do not get your rights or needs met, or opinions heard and respected
- You are left feeling “less than” or inferior to others
- You feel you have no voice
- Others violate your rights
- You’re always hoping things will improve but your issues are still unknown to others

AGGRESSION

Aggression is where one violates the rights of others while demanding that others respect one’s own. This arises when self-worth is inflated through delusions of personal grandiosity. Aggression is primarily destructive to others, but since it often stems from a lack of self-worth (passivity), it also has hidden self-destructive tendencies.

Aggressive people:

- Use words or actions that communicate disrespect to others
- Are not interested in understanding the views of others
- May threaten others to pressure them into responding the way they want
- Use name-calling, profanity, and a loud voice when communicating with others
- Use sarcasm to invalidate what another person is saying
- Blame and accuse others

- Maintain their superiority by putting others down
- Can escalate conflicts to many levels of physical violence

The consequences of using aggression are:

- You get your needs met at the expense of those of others
- Those around you will withdraw and avoid you, making it hard to have relationships
- Can result in a loss of freedom, finances, or life in cases involving violence
- You have to manage the guilt and shame of your past actions

PASSIVE AGGRESSION

Passive aggression is a complex combination of the first two, where one allows others to violate one’s own rights but also violates the rights of others, often by using the first as an excuse for the latter in a destructive feedback loop. This approach requires a lot of tact and subtlety and can be seen as a sort of “slight-of-hand” approach.

The traits and consequences of this approach to conflict are essentially any of those of the first two types.

ASSERTION

Assertion is where one confidently and directly claims one’s rights or puts forward one’s thoughts and feelings, without denying those of others. This arises when self-worth is at a healthy level, often equal to those of others.

Assertive people operate outside of (or between) the defined boundaries of passivity and aggression, making assertion a very difficult thing to achieve due to a reliance on the dynamic approaches of others as references.

The consequences of using assertiveness are:

- You might not get your needs met
- You gain a level of respect
- You will develop better relationships
- You gain new, transferrable skills as a result

Often, as an additional challenge, it is up to the most assertive person in a group to “balance the tables” by encouraging passive people to stand up for themselves and reminding aggressive people to

respect the rights of others. It is not uncommon for passive people to confuse assertion as aggression and aggressive people to confuse it as passivity, simply due to the relativistic nature of the different approaches to conflict resolution. It also should be noted that it is rare for an individual to choose one approach to every situation they encounter; everyone will naturally use a different approach in different situations.

All non-assertive approaches work with an unhealthy view of power, seeing it as a finite, external commodity either to be given up or taken away in a subtractive manner. Assertiveness requires one to adopt the view that power is a renewable, self-generated resource that is always accessible within one's own being/psyche. It can be used to teach others to generate their own power, thus resulting in an additive process.

AN ASSERTIVE TECHNIQUE

A method known as *DESC-scripting* is an assertiveness tool that anyone can use in conflict resolution. The technique follows as such:

1. [D]escribe the offending behavior
 - a. Be concrete about time, location, and frequency of the offending behavior
 - b. Be objective by describing facts instead of perception, and quote anything said as verbatim
 - c. Be calm in your approach
 - d. Focus on the behavior and not the characteristics of the person
2. [E]xpress how you feel about the offending behavior
 - a. Use emotions instead of thoughts
3. [S]pecify what you want done
 - a. Explicitly ask for a small number of reasonable changes
 - b. Specify concrete actions
 - c. Be willing to make changes of your own as well
 - d. Don't simply ask for "satisfaction"
4. [C]onsequences that will result from cooperation and a lack thereof
 - a. Choose positive and negative consequences that are significant to the individual
 - b. Choose consequences that you are willing to commit to

- c. Don't be ashamed to talk about possible punishments
- d. Don't use punishments that are self-defeating

SUMMARY

Now that you have a more comprehensive view of the different approaches and how they relate, you can utilize this knowledge directly in character development and dialogue, not to mention the development of your own character. And if you can teach these skills to others, you are working towards a healthy and constructive society that resolves conflicts without the use of violence.