

# What Is Conflict?

*by Sophia Tutorial*



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the definition of conflict in general terms. This will include:

1. Components of Conflict
2. How We Describe conflict
3. Conflict in Action

## 1. Components of Conflict

Your roommates are frustrated that everyone loads the dishwasher differently. Your colleagues don't agree on priorities for the big upcoming presentation. Your neighbor wants to cut down a tree that you enjoy. These widely varying situations are all examples of conflict.

In basic terms, **conflict** is a form of relationship in which the members find their interactions in some way impeding their goals, their needs, or their well-being.

Conflict always involves **parties**, which are two or more individuals, groups, or entities participating in the disagreement.

These parties are always in a **relationship**, or an association between two or more people (or parties) involving some sort of interaction.

The primary issue at the root of a conflict between parties is a **need or an interest**. These are defined as an action, a belief, or a physical item that a party perceives as important or essential to their satisfaction or happiness.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Relationships

An association between two or more people, groups, or entities, involving some form of interaction.

### Conflict

A form of relationship in which members find their interactions in some way impeding their goal, needs, or well-being.

### Parties

Individuals, groups, or entities involved directly in a conflict.

## Need/Interest

An action, belief, or physical item that a party perceives as important or essential to their satisfaction or happiness.

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## 2. How We Describe Conflict

Frequently when describing conflict, people are really talking about how they reacted to the conflict.

For example, you have probably heard or maybe participated in a conversation that went something like this: “I was so annoyed. Can you believe they did that? I told them... and they said to me... and I was just getting really upset. Then they said, ‘Well if you’re going to be like that...’ and then just walked out the door.”

In this case, the person is describing a conflict by rehashing what they said, what they did, what the other person said, and how they felt. This is a typical response; people often see things through their own lens.

Thus when talk about conflict, we tend to talk about it personally in terms of our own reactions and what we saw happening.

This is why it can helpful to step back and take a look at the basic elements in all conflicts—not only in terms of our own reactions, but also in terms of what is really happening.

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## 3. Conflict in Action

Conflicts can emerge in a variety of situations, where parties in a relationship feel their needs or wants aren’t being met. Let’s look at some examples that illustrate different situations where conflict can occur.

➦ **EXAMPLE** *Conflict between friends.* Two friends are driving down the road together with the windows down. Janet is cold and she wants to roll up the windows and turn on the heat. Dee enjoys the feel of the brisk fresh air, which helps her stay alert while driving, and wants to keep the windows open. Here we have two conflicting needs: the need for temperature comfort, and the need for fresh air for alertness.

➦ **EXAMPLE** *Conflict in a relationship.* John wants to buy himself a motorcycle as a treat because they work hard. His husband Antony thinks motorcycles are dangerous and noisy, so Antony doesn’t value a motorcycle as a luxury worth spending their money on. There are two conflicting wants: John wants to reward himself in a particular way, and Antony does not want to spend their money in that way.

➦ **EXAMPLE** *Conflict at work.* Rico shares the break room with a number of people. He always does the dishes and keeps the area clean, yet there are others who never do the dishes and leave the space dirty. Sometimes there’s even food rotting in the refrigerator. There are two conflicting wants: Rico wants a clean break room without having to do all the work, and his coworkers either don’t care about a clean break room or don’t have any interest in doing the work to keep it clean.

➦ **EXAMPLE** *Conflict between groups.* A city is building a new soccer field. The parents of the soccer team want the city to install a turf field because they decrease injuries for players. The city’s environmental working group wants the city to install a grass field, because they help prevent flooding. There are two conflicting wants: The parents want to protect their kids’ knees, and the environmental group wants to protect the city’s water table.

➦ **EXAMPLE** *Global conflict* One country is in a state of civil war. Their neighbor has been receiving a large number of refugees from the country that's at war, more refugees than their support systems can easily accommodate. The country at war is not in a position to stop its citizens from leaving. There are two conflicting needs: The country at war doesn't want to direct the resources or political will towards stopping people from leaving, and the neighboring country doesn't want to direct the resources or political will towards welcoming and supporting refugees.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Consider a time when you were involved in conflict:

- What was your relationship to the other party involved?
- What needs/interests were at stake in the conflict?
- How was the conflict resolved?



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, we discussed **how we describe conflict** in personal terms, and looked at some examples of **conflict in action**.

You now understand the **components of conflict**: a relationship in which parties involved are interacting in a particular way because they feel that their needs and interests are being challenged. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Conflict**

A form of relationship in which members find their interactions in some way impeding to their goal, needs, or well-being.

##### **Need/Interest**

An action, belief, or physical item that a party perceives as important or essential to their satisfaction or happiness.

##### **Parties**

Individuals, groups, and entities involved directly in a conflict.

##### **Relationship**

An association between two or more people, groups, or entities, involving some form of interaction.