

Title: Panic Mode: Activated

Synopsis:

In this episode of *Alchemy*, Tim and LeeAnna dive deep into the chaotic world of panic, sharing their personal experiences with crises—from hurricanes and near-misses with waterfalls to panicked pilots and life-threatening situations. They explore how panic can reveal the true depths of human emotion, both funny and terrifying, and how writers can harness moments of crisis to create more relatable, human characters. Whether it’s the absurdity of a near-miss or the frozen terror of a hostage situation, panic can be the key to unlocking new dimensions in storytelling.

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Discussion Questions

Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:

- How does panic reveal the true nature of a character?
- How does Tim’s casual recounting of his near-disaster with his daughter contrast with LeeAnna’s more intense recounting of her near-hostage situation?
- Why do you think LeeAnna and Tim see panic in such different lights? How does this reflect how people deal with stress in real life?
- What role does humor play in this episode? How can humor and tension be balanced in writing a crisis scene?
- How does the idea of crisis being a “fertile ground for storytelling” play into how you think about creating conflict in a narrative?

Writer’s Prompts

Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:

- **Prompt 1:** *The Flight from Hell.* Picture this: you’re sitting on a flight, peacefully absorbed in your book, when suddenly, the cabin erupts into pandemonium. The pilot bursts out of the cockpit in a blaze of smoke, yelling something so outrageous that even your bookmark drops in shock. Your task? Recount this incident from the point of view of another passenger who’s just trying to enjoy their chapter—but instead finds themselves smack in the middle of airborne bedlam. Capture every frantic heartbeat, every absurd pause, and every moment of “what in the world?” hilarity or drama. Think of it as a literary roller coaster where the only thing falling faster than the plane is the reader’s jaw.
- **Prompt 2:** *Cool Under Pressure—Until Everyone Else Isn’t.* Now, imagine your main character: the epitome of cool, calm, and collected in the midst of a crisis. They’re the rock

in a sea of chaos—until, of course, they're surrounded by a bunch of panicky, overreacting individuals whose contagious anxiety sends our stoic hero spiraling into a meltdown. Write a scene where your character's cool composure is slowly eroded by the collective hysteria of those around them. How does your hero handle the sudden barrage of chaos? Do they attempt a stoic monologue that crumbles under the weight of their peers' panic? Or do they, like everyone else, eventually get sucked into the frenzy? We want to see the ripple effect of panic—its contagious power, its ability to turn even the calmest soul into a blabbering mess.

- **Prompt 3:** Panic at the Party. Your character is at a casual get-together when a minor misunderstanding spirals into full-blown chaos. A simple miscommunication about who brought what dish turns into an all-out brawl between two guests. As the host, your character tries to maintain order, but everything unravels at lightning speed. Write the scene from the host's perspective, focusing on their attempt to control the chaos and their eventual surrender to the madness.
- **Prompt 4:** The Calm Before the Storm. Your character is aware that a disaster is coming—whether it's a physical crisis like a storm, or a more emotional one, like a difficult confrontation—but they refuse to act on it. Instead, they passively wait. Write the scene where the character is given the chance to act, but procrastinates, only to face the consequences of their inaction when the crisis finally hits. Focus on their internal struggle between fear, anxiety, and denial.
- **Prompt 5:** The Fight or Flight Dilemma. A character is put in a high-stakes situation where they must choose between standing their ground (fight) or running away (flight). The twist is that they freeze in place. Write this scene, focusing on how this inaction defines the character's struggle. Do they feel regret later, or do they come to terms with their reaction?
- **Prompt 6:** Panic, Pride, and Heroism. Your character is placed in an emergency situation where they need to act fast, but they are too prideful to accept help from anyone else. They have to rely on their own skills—though they are far from expert. Write a scene where their panic leads to mistakes, but ultimately, they learn something valuable from the chaos.
- **Prompt 7:** The Calm in the Eye of the Storm. Write a scene where your character is in the middle of a crisis, but they feel strangely detached and calm. Everyone else around them is in a panic, but they experience almost an eerie peace. How does this affect the narrative and the people around them? Is their calmness a sign of control or indifference?

Class Activities

These activities will help expand on the themes of the topic:

- **Group Discussion:** Discuss the different types of reactions to panic—hysterical, stoic, paralyzed, or even numb. In a group, analyze which of these reactions are most common in real life, and which ones are more difficult to portray authentically in writing. What makes each response unique and compelling?
- **Design Exercise:** In pairs, create a crisis scenario—something unexpected and shocking that sends the characters into a state of panic. For example, one person could design the

setup (a car crash, a sudden storm, a power outage) and the other person could design the characters' responses. Then, switch. Afterward, compare and discuss how different characters might react to the same crisis.

- **Debate:** "Is panic necessary for character development?" Debate whether or not a writer can effectively develop a character *without* placing them in a panicked or crisis-filled situation. What other emotions can push a character to grow, and why could panic be such an effective tool for writers?
- **Collaborative Story-Building:** In small groups, develop a short story where panic plays a key role in the plot. Each group member will contribute one element to the story: the setup (where and when the panic happens), the character's reaction to panic, and the aftermath. As a group, write the scene collaboratively, blending each member's contributions into a cohesive narrative.

Closing note from the Podcasters, Tim & LeeAnna

Embrace the chaos, writers. Panic, in its many forms, isn't just a tool for creating high-stakes drama—it's a window into human nature. In a moment of crisis, we can laugh, we can freeze, or we can make a mess of things, and that's what makes stories compelling. By leaning into life's unpredictable, messy, and often ridiculous nature, we can create characters who aren't just believable—they're human. So next time you find yourself in the middle of an emotional whirlwind, remember: there's a great story in it. Just don't forget to laugh through the panic.