

25 Reasons Why Your Imperiled Character Can't Call For Help

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Anyone who writes contemporary action, suspense or thrillers knows the feeling. You work so hard to put your characters in mortal danger. They're lost in a snowstorm. Trapped in an abandoned building. Being chased through the city streets by an axe-wielding maniac. And their only chance for survival is to stay calm, use their head and . . . take out their cell phone and dial 911. Not exactly the heart-pounding scene we had in mind.

In a world where over 80% of American adults have a cell phone, writers are often stuck figuring out why their endangered character can't just call for help. When I bitched about that on Twitter, I got plenty of help with excuses. So I'm going to share them.

- 1) Write a character in that 20% of non-cell-phone users. He hates cell phones. She can't afford it. He doesn't know how to use one. Pick an excuse and run with it.
- 2) No reception. This works very well outside a city—as a rural dweller, I can attest to that. Inside a city? Put your character in a pocket between towers, where she only has intermittent service.
- 3) Lousy reception. Can you hear me now? How about now? Okay, there's an axe-wielding maniac— Hello?
- 4) Left behind. Where's my cell phone? Right. In the charger. At home.
- 5) Dead Battery. Speaking of chargers... A smart character shouldn't head into danger with a nearly dead battery, but if she's been away from home all day, it could die at a very bad time.
- 6) Lying Battery. Ever seen two bars of battery life on your display, start to make a call and watch it drop to zero bars? Cell phones have a sadistic streak. Work with it.
- 7) Cell phone blockers. If a reasonably tech-savvy bad guy plots to lure your protagonist into an empty building, he's going to invest a few hundred in a cell phone blocker.
- 8) Water Trauma. Water: it's everywhere you want it to be. Puddles. Toilets. One respondent said hers died when a bottle of water uncapped in her purse. Make it happen.
- 9) General Trauma. Your character has every intention of calling for help. He pulls out his phone with sweaty fingers and— Whoops. That pavement is hard. That phone is dead.
- 10) Permanent Trauma. On a cliff. In a boat. Hanging outside a helicopter. Those sweaty palms strike again, and this time the phone is gone for good.
- 11) Mechanical Malfunction. Who needs actual trauma? The phone just doesn't work. A restart might help, but your character doesn't have time (or doesn't know how.)

12) EMP (electromagnetic pulse) Stops cell phones and all other electronic equipment. How does it work? Er...I'm a fantasy writer, so I'm taking the next excuse instead. You real world folks can look this up.

13) Superpower. Perfect for urban fantasy authors like me. Fried by a sorcerer's energy bolt. Shorted out by a fire half-demon. Crushed by a werewolf. The list goes on, and oddly, I don't think I've ever used one of them. Hmm.

14) Age. Here's one for my fellow YA writers. Your character's parents have decided she's too young for a cell phone. Now, having been chased by an axe-wielding maniac, maybe she can finally convince her parents that more than her social standing is at risk by their wickedly unfair decision.

15) Confiscated. Got an under 18 character who *does* have a cell phone? Get it confiscated. He used it in class. Her cell phone bill hit four digits. Having a cell phone is a privilege, not a right, young lady.

16) Confiscated Take 2. If your character is captured, the first thing that will be taken away is her cell phone. This also helps after she escapes, and must cross ten miles of countryside instead of just calling for a cab.

17) Lost Phone. The phone is securely tucked into your character's pocket when he starts running for his life, climbing fences and dodging rabid dogs. Then he goes to make that call. Whoops. Maybe his back pocket wasn't so secure.

18) Hero Complex. If your hero is dodging rabid dogs and still not calling for help, there's probably a touch of hero complex there. Most action protagonists—male and female—suffer from this affliction. So yours won't make that call until the absolute last moment, when it's too late for help to arrive.

19) Who Ya Gonna Call? No one. Your character is a lone wolf, which works really well until she's trapped in an abandoned building and realizes no one can come to her aid. She could call 911, but are they really going to believe she's besieged by a cult of axe-wielding maniacs? Probably not.

20) Unpaid Bills. Your character was the one who rang up that 4 digit bill, and being unable to pay it, he's lost his service.

21) Bottomless Purse Syndrome. If your character is a woman with a big purse, yanking out that cell phone while on the run may not be easy. Wallet? No. Paperback novel? No. Kleenex? No. Energy bar? Maybe.

22) General Purse Syndrome. Forget oversized purses. If your character was caught off-guard, grabbing her purse—with her cell phone—maybe either slip her mind or not be possible. Even if she does have it, she may ditch the extra baggage to make running easier...and later discover her mistake.

23) Fake Nails. I'm told that newly applied fake nails wreak havoc with tiny cell phone buttons. Yet another advantage to making your protagonist female.

24) Travel Issues. If your character isn't at home, there are lots of reasons why he can't make that call. All his friends are too far away to help. He doesn't know the local emergency number. He didn't pack the right charger and his phone died yesterday.

25) Pre-Cell Phone Era. Really tired of cell phone issues? Set your book pre-1990. Of course, then you can't use any modern technology, but some days, faced with yet another scene in which you must explain why your character can't just call for help, pre-1990 settings look very, very good.