

WRITER WORKSHOP FOR HOW TO BUILD A CHARACTER
MARCH 2025

Often a story idea will begin with a character. Writers have a picture in their mind of a character they've never met, or a character that's an amalgam of people they've known, or a character that jumps from something they see in real life, and from there a new story is born. How do we create characters that resonate with readers, though? What needs to go into the mix?

First Avoid Stereotypes

In a polarized world, this might seem like a challenge, but consider the people you know well. Very few of them are all one thing or another. Readers make assumptions about characters the same way we jump to conclusions about people we meet briefly, or only know a little bit about. A flat character would be a football player who only talks about football, who watches sports and plays video games. An intriguing character would be a football player who listens to classical music, who maybe practices yoga and has a penchant for mystery novels.

Add some Flaws

Next, remember that all characters are flawed. Nobody is perfect in this world. For your characters to seem real, they shouldn't be, either. They have challenges in life they try to keep hidden. What might your character be embarrassed about?

A Character Wound

In addition to flaws, strong protagonists also have a wound: something in their past that had a negative impact on them and affects how they make decisions in the present. The wound could be an experience that informs how they treat others, how well they trust the people in their lives, or how well they trust themselves. The wound should also somehow relate to the story. In a romance, for example, the wound could be the failure of a past relationship, and because of it, the protagonist is unable to fully commit, afraid what might happen if they risk their heart again.

It's helpful to connect these traits to elements from the character's life or past. For example, a character who grew up with a controlling parent might have difficulty making decisions once they start living on their own. Personality traits might also overlap with physical traits: talking too loudly or too softly or interrupting others, for example.

Add in Motivation, wants, and Needs

Often what a character wants at the beginning is indicative of their flaws, and pushes them in the direction of what they need to learn. Now, a flat character will have similar reactions to the obstacles they face time after time, then suddenly realize something near the very end. Readers want to be kept on their toes, surprised as much by how the character handles situations as by whatever twists and turns the plot introduces. However, we need to see a gradual shift that starts to become noticeable around the midpoint of the story and then crystallizes at the climax.

Character and Believability

Another factor that can contribute to a successful character is an element called "believability." When writers talk about believability, they talk about whether the constituent parts of a character make sense and feel cohesive. It's important to make sure that your characters aren't good at everything they come across. Doing so will reduce your story's believability because—let's face it—no one is good at everything. To this end, you should allow your characters to fail at something, whether that something is huge or inconsequential. For example, we might expect a character who gets paid minimum wage to struggle to pay her bills, so if we see her driving an expensive car or spending several hundred dollars on a meal at a fancy restaurant, we would question these details. There are, of course, stories in which these situations could exist, but the reader would need to know what allowed them to happen (inheritance from a late relative, perhaps, or an irresponsible approach to personal debt).

Adding Physical Detail

In addition to planning your characters thoughtfully, you must also sketch them coherently on the page. Careful selection of physical and environmental details will make some of your character's traits visible to your reader without you having to tell them outright what you mean. A character who is disorganized might have wrinkled clothing or might consistently arrive late to appointments. An

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introverted character might bring a book or notebook everywhere they go and might also stay out of crowded spaces (or feel uncomfortable in those spaces).

Exercise: In a short vignette, and using only physical details (e.g., characters' clothing, appearance, or body language), make it clear to a reader that a character is experiencing one of the following conditions: worry, hunger, grief, joy, confusion, lack of sleep, anxiety, homesickness. The word you chose should not appear in your vignette, nor should any synonyms.

Ideas for construction of character-plot connection:

The *character-first approach* constructs a story's plot for a character that already exists. This approach asks a writer to build a character that they find interesting and then assemble the plot around her. For example, a character who is struggling to overcome a phobia might, as a plot element, encounter the thing she fears. Success in this instance would mean that she doesn't let the fear overcome her.

The *plot-first approach* starts by defining the major conflicts the writer wants to include in a piece of fiction and then builds a character who will be motivated by those conflicts. For example, a writer could decide to explore the effect of a catastrophic storm on a city before writing a main character. A character that would feel motivated by this conflict would be one with a connection to the city or to someone living in the city. Therefore, the son of someone who went missing in the storm would likely be a good focal character for this story.

Small Goals and Big Goals

Though it's important for characters to have at least one big goal, it can be boring for the reader if a character is totally preoccupied with a single motivation. Strong characters generally have two or more goals of varying sizes that they might confront separately or at the same time.

Adding Personality

Broadly, "personality" refers to the collection of beliefs, thought patterns, and other mental qualities that dictate a character's actions. A personality trait could be the character's bubbly disposition, their self-deprecating humour, or the fact that they're always nervous. When constructing a character, it's important to think about how she would react in a number of situations. Here are some questions to help you discover your character's personality traits:

Is he fond of attention, or does he avoid it?

Is she curious to learn more about a topic/location/person, or does she keep to herself?

How big of a role does fear play in his day-to-day activities?

How does this character react if things don't go the way she wants them to?

Does he think that he's more intelligent/less intelligent than others around him?

How does he feel about making decisions?

Does she make decisions quickly or slowly?

Does he tend to regret decisions they've made?

Exercise: In a short vignette, deliver some news to your character. The news can be good or bad. It can affect just the character, or the entire world population, or any number of people in between. How does this character react? Who do they tell, if anyone? How do they interact with the space they're in (e.g. punch a wall, hug a stranger)? Try this exercise several times with the same character but different contexts (e.g., the character receiving the news alone versus receiving it in a public place) to see how they react under different circumstances.

Note – all these ideas have been sourced from the internet and are not for distribution outside this workshop.