

Creating Believable Characters

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The most memorable characters stay with us long after we've finished the novel because they're complex and multi-dimensional. We may not like them because they're unlikeable, but when they are well-drawn, we understand them and empathize.

The **why** and the **what** of your character will help you understand her **purpose**, **personality**, and **past** which will lead to her growth.

Why

The reason you want to learn all you can about Character Development is because it drives Conflict.

All stories are about people, even when they're about animals and even toys. The stories that move us most, the ones that stick inside years later, are those inhabited by characters we can connect with and admire.

Questions: Can your reader connect with your characters? What Conflict does your character(s) face that will drive your story?

The What

Character Arc drives your story. Character Arc is when your characters learned how to rise above their own flaws and weaknesses to do something great—this is known as a *Character Arc*. No characters resonate more with the reader than those who overcome their own flaws. Flaws and imperfections cause them to be real. The development of a character is only interesting if they overcome something.

Question: What weaknesses, imperfections, quirks, and vices does your character face?

The Purpose

Decide what purpose your character serves.

Are you creating a main character or a supporter? By deciding what role your character plays in the story beforehand, is easier to create a personality to fit that role.

Question: What role(s) does your character play? Answer this for any of the characters who are written throughout your manuscript.

The Personality

Give your character some basic stats.

What does this person look like? How old are they? Where did they come from and how were they raised? What are some of their likes and dislikes? Think of your character as someone you've just met and are trying to get to know. Try to find an image of what your character looks like. I find Google images are perfect for this.

Questions: Answer the ones above for your characters. Do you have an image of your character(s)?

The Past

What made them what they are today? Is there some deep dark secret that the character feels like he must hide? Was the character born into extraordinary circumstances or did she have a normal childhood? Create a biography for your character and get as in-depth as you like with this. You don't need to put all of character's biography in your manuscript, but you need to know them.

Question: What in your character's past helps to drive your story?

The following questions will help you go deeper with the points above when creating believable characters.

1. Where does your character live?

Not only what country or state, but environment. Consider their family life. Married? Single? Content with their present living conditions?

2. Where is your character from?

Where did he grow up? Washington, DC or Lizard Lick, NC? Yes, Lizard Lick is a real place. Public school? Private? How did their parents' employment (or lack of) affect them?

3. What are his World Views and do those views help to develop drama in your story?

4. What are your character's flaws? This helps to address "the what."

- In some instances, their world view is flawed.

5. What are your character's values?

Typical values common to many people, include family, other relationships, work or study, spirituality, and leisure time.

We all have a combination of these values to a varying degree. To find out what's most important to your character, put the list of values into the order of importance for your character and try to pick out a specific aspect of each.

You can go through the same process for your antagonist. What view does this character need to have to challenge your main character?

6. How old is your character?

This is something you need to think early on in your character-building process. If I said think of Johnny Smith as a five-year-old. Now as a eighteen-year-old. Now as an eighty-year-old. Each Johnny Smith will have different character traits that need to be established.

7. What is your character called?

Names are important. Look up their meanings. Does the meaning of the name fit the character you're trying to build? The time period? When working with ethnic characters make sure you have appropriate names. Buffy Smith is not a name I would give to someone who is Latino.

8. What does your character look like?

Consider all the physical attributes. Height? Weight? Eye color? How does your character's attributes affect them? Does she think she's too thin? Heavy? Too many freckles?

- Mannerism: Is there a certain way they look at their image in the mirror? Do they fidget with their hands? Play with their hair? Remember their outward behavior is based on an inner trait.

9. What kind of childhood did he or she have? Remember, this is part of her past. Create your character's background. Her childhood experiences could be the root of issues in your story.

10. Occupation?

What he does will determine how he views the world around him. A music teacher would be more concerned with school budget cuts than an insurance adjuster.

11. How does your character deal with conflict and change?

This is so important to helping move your story along. What are the external and internal conflicts he's facing? What needs to change?

12. Who else is in your character's life?

Wife? Husband? Kids? Parents? Co-workers? How do these other people help/hinder the conflict or change in the character's life?

13. What is your character's goal or motivation in this story or scene?

This is a question you will ask repeatedly depending on the length of the story. What does your character have to gain or lose? These are important questions to ask.

If you are writing about a marginalized person or community, here are six points that may help you.

1. “Write what you know” applies diversity as much as it does space travel or gardening or marine biology.
2. Write complex, logical, fleshed out characters that have arcs, strengths, flaws, and chemistry.
3. Fill in your blind spots. Talk to people about your work and take constructive feedback seriously. Hire a sensitivity reader.
4. Write in good faith.
5. Challenge your assumptions on how you think people are or ought to be. Chances are those assumptions are based only on your specific worldview.
6. Focus on bringing out the parts of your character’s life that are important to the reader; don’t treat diversity as a trend.

Don’t get defensive. If somebody finds that your work doesn’t do a good job of representing diverse experiences, that’s not a reflection on you, that’s a reflection of what’s on the page, and what’s on the page can change. Even if you get your beta readers on-board with your idea, and your friends approve, you’ve reached out to a sensitivity reader, and you’re extra careful to do your research, there’s still a chance people won’t like the choices you’ve made in your work.

Authors need to understand their most important audience is the reader. The goal of any author is to influence the reader. Make them laugh, cry, think, smile, question or impact their world view, to name a few. Never include a character because “it’s what’s selling” or because you believe you should. **Diverse characters don’t need a reason to exist, they just do.**

****A few last words of advice****

- **Write what you know:** Believable characters come from real experiences, real people, and situations. I love to people watch and then imagine their lives. What a great exercise for creating characters.

- Do your homework: You may have to research your character, especially if your character is outside of your community, given a particular profession or a context that requires some special knowledge. Good research requires time and more than just Google.
- Hire a sensitivity reader if needed. A sensitivity reader assists in strengthening the writer's understanding and authenticity in their manuscript concerning a marginalized community.
- Learn from the other authors: *A good writer is a good reader.* Look at how the greats wrote their characters. Study character development in the hands of a great writer.
- Write, write, write: You will see the results as your own characters take on more depth and dimension.
Crafting perfect characters takes plenty of time, effort, editing, asking, and answering a whole lot of questions.

Some excerpts from Jim Dempsey's *The Wonders of Your Character's World View*