

Character Agency



The following article is condensed from the excellent article “How To Write High Agency Characters” by P.S. Hoffman. <https://pshoffman.com/character-creation/high-agency-characters/>

Stories do not “happen” to high agency characters. Instead, it is high agency characters that make great stories happen.

What is Character Agency?

Agency is a combination of your character’s ability and desire to act. To make their own decisions, act on their motivations, and create meaningful developments in the story. Without agency, characters are little more than leaves, pulled along by the river. They don’t make an effort to change their situation, therefore we may not necessarily care about them.

- What if Bilbo stayed in his hobbit home?
- What if Luke Skywalker refused to join the Rebel Alliance?
- What if Harry Potter never tried to grab his letter to Hogwarts?

High agency characters act on what they believe (or, they act on what their complex set of emotions convince them to do). High agency characters don’t always make the right choice, but they always make an interesting one. It is the act of choosing, and getting to watch the consequence of their actions, that keep the readers glued to the page.

Not every character should be high agency. Side characters often have low agency. Low agency characters can even be the coolest, or cutest, or most charismatic characters in a story, but they are never the focus. They can add colour, humour, sound and feeling to your world and a respite from the action, but whether they are in a story or not, the story generally remains the same.

Examples of Low Agency Characters:

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- The Hobbit: The dwarves add a rich, fairy-tale quality to the story, but most of them are simply along for the ride
- Star Wars: C-3PO always does what he's told. And never anything else. At best, he's a useful tool.
- Harry Potter: Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy's father, is little more than a nefarious pawn of the Dark Lord Voldemort

Motivation and Agency

Agency is Fueled by Your Character's Motivations

People are a whole flock of emotions: competing desires and reactions and needs, all trying to figure out which direction to fly. Eventually, that flock decides on a direction. That's where agency comes in. It's about the Prime Motivation; the No.1 thing your character believes matters right now. If they're dying of thirst, nothing matters but grabbing that glass of water. Agency is about how hard they will try to get that water.

- High Agency characters will do anything, no matter the effort involved.
- Low Agency characters will take the path of the least resistance.

This is why it's so critical to find the right character motivations. Powerful motivations will naturally give your characters high agency. In any one scene, it's not about who has agency or who doesn't (usually). It's about who has the most agency, and how they use that to influence the situation.

Even side characters may have high agency in one scene, and almost none in the next. And that's how it should be. In fact, some of the best conflict comes from two characters with equal agency, disagreeing with each other. Isn't that what the whole Hero/Villain dynamic is about?



Different stories will demand different ranges of agencies.

The 3 Types of Character Agency

There are relative degrees of Agency and your characters can move up and down that scale. During the course of a story a character can grow their agency. Think about any story about empowerment of a character and you will see agency grow as the character realises their potential.

Constant High Agency

A *Constant High Agency Character* will always take action.

They need not be the main character. They work well as the support side character for a *Growth Agency Character*.

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Characters who always have high agency are perfect for plot-driven stories, like thrillers and super-power fantasies. Because plot-driven stories thrive on one question: “What happens next?” And these characters are always barreling full-steam ahead, which means all we have to do is follow them, and we’ll find the answers.

How to Write Interesting High-Agency Characters

- Give your character a specialty, like a magic power or unique knowledge.
- Give them an unattainable goal, like “save the world” or “become the No.1 witch in your school” that burns at the core of their being.

They may be high agency, but failure is key. Failure and overcoming failure makes reading about these characters compelling. They will try, and fail, and try again. It’s always one step forward, and nineteen steps back. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep trying. These try/fail cycles can make up a scene, or last an entire novel.

Examples of High-Agency Characters

Gandalf | The Hobbit

Gandalf is not just any wizard, he’s the most powerful wizard to have ever lived. But Middle Earth is vast, and under siege by many dark forces. He has a burning goal of reinstating the Dwarves in their rightful home. But there’s obviously some larger, more world-spanning motive.

Throughout the adventure, he keeps the party headed in the right direction:

- Rescues them when they can’t help themselves.
- Scouts out and warns the group of the final climactic battle.
- Keeps the group informed of the dangers that lie ahead.

And ...

... most importantly, he inspires Bilbo to do the right thing at the most important times.

Ryland | Project Hail Mary

The protagonist knows two things really well: astrobiology (the study of life outside of earth) and high school physics. When he finds himself waking up on a ship, hurtling near the speed of light away from Earth, with no way to get back home, physics and astrobiology are the only powers he has to figure out:

1. What’s going on?
2. What should I do about it?

But he never gets discouraged. He never stops. He just finds the problem, isolates it, breaks it down into smaller parts, and gets to work. That’s the whole book.

Growth Agency

Characters who grow their agency over time make fantastic protagonists and antagonists. It’s engaging to watch somebody take the reins of their life and dramatically affect the outcome of the story (whether for good or ill). Often, the whole point of the story is to watch the Main Character move their agency from “barely anything at all” to “the most active character in the whole story.”

How to Write Growth Agency Characters

1. Start with a character who wants something, but is too afraid to act on it.
2. Thrust them into a “do or die” situation.
3. Let them choose to do the one thing they would never do.
4. DON'T let them off the hook. Make them face severe consequences. Usually, this is an ever-escalating series of extreme circumstances just on the edge of “I can do this/I can’t do this.”

Each new situation should be tough. Sometimes, your hero will fail and their agency will backslide. But the general trend should be up, so that by the end of the story, your hero is completely unrecognisable from the first pages.

Examples of High “Growth” Agency Characters

Bilbo Baggins | The Hobbit

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Bilbo starts off as a small-town person who mildly dreams of (and fears) adventure. When the call to adventure comes knocking, he chooses to refuse it. And then ... he changes his mind.

Along the bumpy road, Bilbo decides he made a mistake coming out here with all these uncivilized dwarves. He sees numerous opportunities to back out, but he signed a contract to help them, and he chooses to stick with it. The story culminates in a moment where Bilbo realizes his friend, and the king of the dwarves, is leading them all into disaster. Bilbo decides to stand up to the group, to risk his neck, and to do the very thing he swore he would never do, all to save his friends.

Nora Seed | The Midnight Library

Nora is another fantastic example of a low-agency character who grows into high agency. Nora is suicidal. When the book opens, she is ready to end it. This is the ultimate “I give up,” moment. This is the last act of agency.

Then, she finds herself in some weird, hybrid afterlife/purgatory place. A library in the void, absolutely filled with books. Each book is another life she could've lived. When she opens one, and starts to read about her life as a rockstar, or a scientist in the arctic, or marrying her first love, she falls into that world and lives it. With each life, Nora gains a better understanding of what she wants. And thus, she starts to actively seek the perfect life.

Situational High Agency

Situational agency is when a character's agency changes depending on the situation.

How to Write Situationally Active Characters

You can have a simple set of rules that govern your character's agency:

- A Monarch will always act in matters of diplomacy and court intrigue
- They may only have a mild hand in matters of marriage or love
- And they may be totally helpless when taken captive by a vicious assassin

... or, you can go the complex route. You can let your characters' agency be an interplay of motives, emotions, circumstance, and power dynamics between characters.

Writers can readily create *Situational High Agency* characters, because all they have to do is simply feel how the character would feel at that moment. This can create some nuanced, emotionally rich, and moving characters which readers can easily identify with. These characters are lauded throughout literary history. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* come to mind. Situational agency can yield highly-realistic, beautiful characters that can pop out of the background when necessary, or loom front and center, taking us with them on truly emotional experiences.

Examples of Situational Agency Characters

Thorin Oakenshield | The Hobbit

Thorin Oakenshield is integral to *The Hobbit*. But, in many cases, he can be replaced by any of the dwarves. Or he stands off to the side, brooding. Only in the scenes that require a King's action does he take a stand, always to a great consequence. Sometimes, it's wonderful. Other times, it is the height of hubris.

Dorian Gray | The Picture of Dorian Gray

In Oscar Wilde's one and only novel, Dorian Gray is a man lost in his own beauty, and the hedonistic pleasures of the world. An artist painted a portrait of Dorian. Instead of growing old, Dorian remains forever young, while his portrait ages in his stead.

At times, Dorian is a force of great change (and even murder) in his world. At other times, he spends years and decades, doing nothing. Letting the world happen around him. Sometimes, he is the hunter. Others, he is the hunted.

7 Ways to Give Your Characters More Agency

Say you swap out your main character for another. Does it change the story at all? If it does, then you have a High Agency character. If it doesn't, then you have a Low Agency character. How do we give our character more agency?

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- 1. Boost Your Character's Motivations.**
Stronger motivations will make your characters want to act more immediately.
- 2. Make Them More Aware Of Their Situation.**
A character who can see the problem from more than one side will have more than one solution. This will let them create more interesting plans.
- 3. Show the Consequences of Not Acting**
When a character sees what's at stake, they should want to grab the wheel and smash the gas pedal.
- 4. Raise the Stakes, Even When Your Character Takes Action.**
The idea is to create a ticking clock to add urgency. This pushes your character to act faster. Maybe even more recklessly.
- 5. Give Them Several Options.**
For every scene, write X things they might do. Pick the most interesting. This will make YOU get more creative with your solutions.
- 6. Make Them Do the Wrong Thing for the Right Reason.**
Characters who always do the wrong thing are annoying
Characters who do the wrong thing because it will help someone else more are beloved
- 7. Make the Situation More Personal.**
If the scene is hyper-relevant to your character's largest problem (e.g. they've kidnapped his child) or his greatest weakness (e.g. they're in a helicopter and he's scared of flying), it can make your character act in some fascinating ways.

How Different High Agency Characters Approach a Problem

Consider the following situation. In the Hobbit, the dwarves are captured by the elves. Bilbo, Gandalf, and Thorin Oakenshield all have high agency, because they would all take a different route to free their friends.

- Gandalf would probably negotiate his way out. Or, he would simply magic the dwarves into hiding, and they might flee.
- Thorin Oakenshield would rage and roar and fail to save anyone. He might even start a war with the elves after lambasting them with too many insults.
- And resourceful Bilbo, would use the ring to make himself invisible, and steal the keys.



Writing Exercises

The following exercises have been adapted from suggestions in the following webpages;

<https://nicolebianchi.com/writing-exercises-character-development/>, and <https://kindlepreneur.com/character-development-exercises/>.

The idea is to explore some of your existing characters to see their relative levels of agency in action. Try one of these.

The “Dinner Table” Exercise

Imagine if all of your characters were sitting around a dinner table and something happened out of the ordinary. How would each of your characters respond? This is an excellent exercise to make sure that all of your characters have unique personalities. It is also useful for seeing who takes the initiative and who sits back and goes along with it.

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Write Other People Gossiping About Your Character

Write a conversation between two people who are NOT your main character, and have them discuss your character. Are they friendly, supportive, critical, or odious? Do they speak about that person in a way that is positive, or as more like gossip? Maybe have them chat about some event where your main character was, and what that character did.

Do a Little Fan-fiction

As an exercise in seeing how your character responds, write a scene or even a whole story where your character interacts with characters from a story you already know? Imagine the ultimate crossover between your story and your favorite franchise. Pick your favorite book or movie, and select a character, setting or situation from that story. Then write a scene where your character meets that person or experiences that setting or situation. How do they react? What do they do?



Rapunzel - Fury Road