Creation, Care, and Feeding of Your Characters

At the heart of any story, are the characters. Making them interesting to your readers is critical to the success of your story. *Interesting* is not the same as *relatable* or *likeable*. A strong and believable character can draw the reader into the story as the reader becomes more engaged in the situations and challenges that befall your characters.

This article lightly covers the topic of character creation and development to help you create characters with depth. Making a new character is fun – it's like meeting someone new.

What We're Trying to Achieve

Crafting complex characters involves digging deep into their psyches and uncovering what makes them tick. While pondering how to develop characters in creative writing, always remember that multidimensional characters are essential. They don't fit neatly into black-and-white categories; instead, they comprise contradictions and layers in exactly the same way as real people. Consider an introverted character who surprises everyone by stepping up in a crisis or a confident leader who fears vulnerability. These complexities add realism and intrigue.

Balancing different character traits and gradually revealing them through actions and inner thoughts is a skill necessary in the creative writing process. A compelling story with multidimensional characters requires understanding that people can simultaneously embody traits like bravery and fear or generosity and selfishness. Creating this depth involves allowing your characters to make mistakes, feel conflicted, and grow. These authentic human attributes will ensure your readers relate to the characters on a personal level.

Incorporating this multifaceted approach feeds directly into how to develop characters in creative writing that leave a lasting impression. Your aim is to weave together internal conflict, diverse characteristics, and believable growth throughout your narrative. This not only enhances engagement but also encourages readers to reflect on their complexities.

Who is This Character of Yours?

One of the first things you will need to do as you get stuck into your story, is to create and develop your cast – the main characters, at least. Considering the simple list of questions below, will help you form your characters' looks, motivations, behaviours, mannerisms, style, and vulnerabilities.

Personal Background

- What is your character's full name? This may develop as you think more about your character.
- What was their early life like?
- Who are their parents and what is their relationship with them?
- What is their greatest achievement?
- What is their biggest secret?
- What do they do to support themselves and others?

Physical Appearance

- How well do they look after themselves and their appearance?
- How do they dress?
- Do they have any distinguishing features, like birthmarks, warts with hairs growing out of them, or tattoos?
- Are they rugged, athletic, overweight, slight, tall, gangling?

Personality Traits

- What are their core personality traits?
- How do they react under stress?
- What are their biggest fears or aversions?
- What motivates them to pursue their goals?

Relationships

- Who is their closest friend, love interest, or ally?
- What is their most important relationship?
- How do they interact with family members, colleagues, equals, those in other demographics, authority?
- Who do they get along with the least?

Goals and Conflicts

- What is their greatest goal or desire?
- What obstacles do they face in achieving this goal?
- How do they handle conflict?
- What might they learn about themselves through their journey?

Interests and Hobbies

- What are their favourite activities or hobbies?
- What do they do for fun?
- Do they have any unique skills or talents?

Using these questions can help you create characters that feel real and relatable, enhancing your storytelling. You don't need to include or reveal all of this detail in your story, but it will help to have it in the back of your mind so it helps shape the way they behave and how others behave towards them.

To help you answer these question, **observe other people**. Pay attention to real-life interactions and behaviours. How do other people react to stressful situations? How do they express emotions? If you know anything about their background, can you see links between their background and their behaviours?

Create a Backstory

While it's not necessary to share the character's backstory with your reader, it helps if *you* know it. You can use this added information to help you work out what informs their decision-making, and how they approach the problems and complications you will throw at them as you write your story.

Consider things like, their family history, what they do to earn a living, events from the past that will have had a big impact on them in some way.

Flaws, Weaknesses, Imperfections, and Vulnerabilities

We've already looked at using flaws in our writing, so, here's a quick reminder about why we'd make our characters less than perfect. Adding characters who are *flawed* can make the story more realistic, and memorable for the reader. Flawed characters create problems and challenges for themselves, and others in the story. Their flaws and weaknesses are useful for making the characters' journeys just that little bit harder. Overcoming a flaw can be a major part of the story.

As you develop your characters, bear in mind that their flaws will typically be the natural flip-side of their positive traits. When you consider their flaws, they should come from whatever their defining positive traits are. For example;
- If the character is brilliantly intelligent, maybe their flaw is being patronising to the people around them.
- If the character's key strength is their independence, their flaw might be an unwillingness to work in a team.

Motivations, Goals, and Values

At risk of sounding like a corporate strategy session, exploring your character's driving ambitions, hopes, desires, and goals will help you decide what path a story takes, and why the character chooses to take one route and not another. Their actions and decisions need to be consistent with their personality and views.

Giving the character goals and aspirations, will provide you with an opportunity to show how they grow and develop as the story progresses. It may be that the story isn't aligned with their goals, but this isn't a problem because it creates tension for the character, if they find themselves being directed towards other goals that are less optimal for them. Part of their growth and development may be coming to terms with this change in goals, and acceptance that things won't turn out exactly as they had wanted.

Naming Your Characters

A character's name is very important. Names have a whole heap of our own personal baggage and preconceptions associated with them. Of course, they also reflect the character's culture, background, and era. You need to be comfortable with the name you give them, and be prepared to change it at any time if you find that it doesn't fit the character – that's where *search and replace* comes in handy.

Some key things to do as you develop a name for your character's
- Do some research. Choose historically / culturally accurate names.
- Do a web search on the name, just to avoid any embarrassment later on.
- Choose realistic names

Great resources for naming your characters are;
- **Baby name lists**. These typically give the meanings and are for any culture and nationality you wish your character to be. There are hundreds on the web.
- **Name Generators**. There are many name generators on the web too – some are excellent, others are a bit underwhelming. These can be for any genre. Typically, they will present you with a short

list of names. If you don't like them, hit the button again, to get a new list. Repeat until you get a name you think will work.
- **Newspapers, and Bill Boards**. Have a read through the local Newspaper and amalgamate first and last names that appeal. Take a look at the names on real estate signs – these can also be mix and matched with reckless abandon to find a suitable name for your characters.

Describing Your Characters

The same tricks and techniques used for describing scenes can be used to describe characters, but a character is active and so allows many more opportunities to describe them as they interact with the world around them. Showing them in action will add a great deal of depth to your characters and help your readers understand them more fully.

Your reader's imagination is your most powerful tool. You don't have to describe every detail – instead, let the readers' imagination fill in the gaps. Fire their imagination with a few simple words. Who is more interesting?
- *Joan, who had short blond hair, strong arms, and blue eyes.*
- *Joan, the woman who could swing a broadsword better than most men.*

When you can show your characters, without explicitly telling readers what they look like, you will make your characters feel more organic, and will keep your readers immersed in your story. By not describing your characters in extreme detail, you invite the reader to be part of the creative process. It's only when the movie of your story comes out, and they find that your character hasn't got a moustache like they'd imagined, that they will take to social media and write snaky reviews and personal attacks.

Here are some ways in which you can show your characters through your story telling, rather than explicitly describing them:
- **How Do They Act?** How they act towards themselves. This includes personal habits and quirks. How they act towards others.
- **How do they talk?** Are they wordy? Do they banter? Are they curt? Do they come across as needy, or bossy? Do they have an accent? Use dialogue to reveal their personality, background, traits, and emotions.
- **Their surroundings**: The atmosphere and surroundings will play a major part in how readers will view your characters. The actions and decisions of your characters in the context of their surroundings will reveal a great deal about them. A very well dressed and polite character will not be unusual in a high class english mansion in the 1920s, but would be a very outlandish character in a story set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. How such a character could be in such a story would be revealed through story telling with hints about feudal lords or protected enclave, perhaps. The surroundings can also help show a characters' backstory.
- **What Do They Do?** Describing what they do is a short cut that provides a lot of detail about the character very quickly. A theoretical physicist conjures up a very different type of character from a blacksmith's apprentice. They will dress differently, act and speak differently, and likely interacting with different circles of people. In the case of minor characters, a quick description of what they do, is all the description they need
- **How Other Characters React to Them**. How other characters talk about, or react to, your characters will make a huge difference in how readers perceive them.

Character Growth (or Not)

Over the course of the story, the character <u>may</u> change and grow. Whether they develop will depend on where you may want to take the story. There are many examples of very successful story franchises where the characters don't develop. Part of their appeal is that the audience know what they're going to get. Did the *Famous Five* have any character development? No. You could pick up any of the Famous Five stories and read them in any order without finding Julian acting like less of a tosser, because Anne told him a few home truths in one of the other books you have yet to read, and you missed reading the books where he was sulking.

Back on topic, most stories will have some degree of character development as the characters come up against challenges, attempt to overcome them, fail, get a few bruises, learn from their mistakes, and

eventually get to the end of the story, a slightly different person from the one they were at the start of the story. Some things that may have happened to the character during the story.
- Emotional growth
- Better able to work with their flaw(s).
- Learned about themselves or their background.
- Begin to understand the antagonist.
- More resilient.
- Have found something or come to terms with something.
- Have resolved a conflict (internal or external)

Look to the character's flaws, drives, goals, emotional state, and relationships, to help shape how they will change as the story progresses.

Angel Heart

Final Word

Developing characters is fun. There are many different ways of creating a believable character, or at least one that fits your story. A favourite method of mine is to get hold of one of my many RPG source books and use the character creation tools in them, to shape a character with quirks, flaws, and skills. I can then dial them back a touch to make them a bit more realistic. What this approach gives me, are characters that are not like those I might make up myself. They will have personalities and flaws that are a surprise to me too and give me some good challenges to tackle as they get thrown into the story. I use this approach a great deal for minor characters. For major characters, I tend to have an idea of the type of character I need for a particular story, and so can rough them in just from my imagination, but I'll reach for the RPG source books to provide more details.

Sources

"*How To Develop Characters In Creative Writing*" by Dennis-Danziger - https://dennisdanziger.com/how-to-develop-characters-in-creative-writing/

"*5 Ways To Describe Your Character (Without Actually Describing Them)*" by P. S. Hoffman - https://pshoffman.com/character-creation/write-character-description-without-physical-traits/

"*How to Develop a Fictional Character: 6 Tips for Writing Great Characters*" - https://www.masterclass.com/articles/writing-tips-for-character-development

"*15+ Character Development Exercises for Writers*" by Jason Hamilton - https://kindlepreneur.com/character-development-exercises/

Writing Challenge

Here are a few short, focused exercises to help develop well-rounded characters. Try a couple.

Begin With an Image

Choose one of the photos as a prompt for a character description or scene where you show them in a situation where their personalities, and mannerisms can be seen in action. Hopefully none of these people are ones you know.

Begin With a Name

Create a name and then describe the character that springs to mind with that name. Write a scene with them in a day to day situation or where their personality will be on show.

A suggested starting place is either some reshuffling of names from the newspaper (or Papers Past), or take the name of your first pet, and give it a surname based on the name of the first road or street you lived on. For instance; *Frisky Kapara*, or *Roadkill Douglas*, or *Bobby Carter*.

Do a Little Fan-fiction

Imagine your character interacting with characters, places, and situations, from a story you're familiar with. Imagine the ultimate crossover between your story and your favourite franchise.

Pick your favourite book or movie, and select a character, scene, or location from that story. Then write a scene where your character interacts with the world and people of your selected story.

Write Other People Gossiping About Your Character

Very often, we learn more from others about ourselves that we might not have known on our own. Others can provide unique perspectives, and in some cases expose huge biases (on both sides). For example, a proud character might not realise that he/she is proud, but it's easy for an outside observer to spot this.

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 more catty and snide?