

# Writing Flawed Secondary Characters

Okay, so this article is about creating characters who are different from yourself, and generally a bit unpleasant to be around for any length of time. These are characters you might have in the background of your story. People who your character encounters that may rub them up the wrong way, annoy them or make things difficult. The types of people we're looking at are officious parking wardens, bullies, rude motorists, and cheats.

The main point about this article is writing characters who are different from yourself.

The techniques here can be applied to supporting characters who aren't horrible, you'd just use a different list of personality traits, which don't include being a sociopath, imperious, rude, or mean.

## Why do we want to write about horrible people?

If everybody was nice, reasonable, good natured, fair, approachable, and extraordinarily humble – just like us, a story may get a bit same-same. By adding in characters who are *flawed* the story can become more realistic, and memorable for the reader. Flawed characters create problems and challenges for the protagonist, especially those flawed characters with agency. The protagonist's own flaws can cause problems and challenges for themselves too, as they make their way through the story.

There is a certain fascination with unlikable characters. There are some stories where the protagonist is unlikeable. It's like watching a slow-moving train-wreck. A sense of disbelief. How can this person do that? Are they going to get their comeuppance? Whose life are they going to wreck now, as they manipulate, back-stab, slander, and black-mail their way through the story?

*A character who sets himself up for conflict and consequences through the dastardliness of his doing—is surely unlikable, yes, but also magnetic. You want to watch him ruin his life. He repulses you in the same way a car accident is simultaneously disturbing and hard to look away from. This character is a train wreck, and it is glorious to behold. Every time he does something unwholesome, immoral, felonious, or just, like, super-rude, he creates a conflict. The anticipation and delivery of that consequence are deeply satisfying for a reader, and by their very nature, not-nice characters create these conflicts almost constantly. In the words of Oscar Wilde, “The suspense is terrible; I hope it will last.”*

Writing the Unlikeable Character (and Why You Should) - Adrienne Crezo

An unlikeable secondary character, is unlikely to be followed so closely, but their actions, or lack of, will impact the main character in some way, and perhaps raise the ire of the reader. Will the reader see some payback? Probably not. That's just life, and is entirely up to the author.

## Developing a Flawed Minor Character

### Writing from Life

Take a moment to think about all the people you know. Are they all likable? No. Taking note of people's behaviours and using this for inspiration for your story's characters' behaviour is a good way of creating flawed characters. It may even be therapeutic. Someone in a four wheel drive is tailgating you? – Include them in your story as a pushy, impatient, self-centred, small minded, rugby-playing, bigot who your main character has the misfortune to encounter while investigating the murders of local sports personalities. What happens to them is up to you.

Writing from life is a good source of believable characters just as drawing from life is good for portraying the human form.

## Writing Flawed Secondary Characters

---

As you develop your supporting characters, and extras, 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.

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. If the protagonist, has encountered someone community minded doing some voluntary work and acts in an entitled and dismissive manner around them, the volunteer might be excused for getting grumpy with the protagonist.

### Degrees of Horribleness

There are a whole range of negative traits that you can lumber your characters with. They can range from the completely harmless or even amusing, say *Gullible*, to the downright dangerous and destructive like *psychotic*.

- *All character flaws typically have consequences of some kind, depending on how severe the flaw is (and the character in question).*
- *Character flaws can also manifest differently based on the personality of each character and their role in the story.*
- *Overall, there are three categories of character flaws: minor, major, and fatal. Your characters can have flaws from multiple categories if you want.*

75+ Character Flaws To Use In Fiction Writing (with Examples) - Glenn Carreau

### Minor Flaws

Most minor flaws are more annoying than harmful; some are even a little endearing. Others do have the potential to harm, but rarely evolve to that extent. They will likely add a little friction into your story. As with any character, minor flaws can be applied to the protagonist.

Examples are:

Awkward, Boring, Capricious, Childish, Clumsy, Foolish, Gossipy, Gullible, Humorless, Lazy, Meek, Mischievous, Naïve, Obnoxious, Prideful, Skeptical, Spacey, Spoiled, Stubborn, Tactless, Vain.

### Major Flaws

If characters with minor flaws are friction in the easy movement of the story, those with major flaws are the handful of grit and gravel thrown into the story's gears to start making things a bit rough for the protagonist. They are serious and will definitely impact the story in a big way. Major flaws can be emotional, mental, or physical. They're significant but not necessarily unforgivable. Again, Major Flaws can be applied to the protagonist too.

Examples are:

Adulterous, Anxious, Apathetic, Arrogant, Belligerent, Bitter, Cowardly, Dishonest, Envious, Greedy, Hedonistic, Hubristic, Hypocritical, Ignorant, Incompetent, Inconsiderate, Judgmental, Lustful, Morally gray, Obsequious, Possessive, Quixotic, Rigid, Selfish, Short-tempered, Spiteful, Stingy, Stupid, Vengeful, Weak-willed

### Fatal Flaws

Fatal flaws are generally the domain of a story's villains, and unlikely to be applied to a minor or secondary character. They can be fatal to the characters in a literal way or can lead to their downfall and failure. Some readers will consider various fatal flaws unforgivable, whether or not the character attempts to atone for their flaws in the story.

Examples are:

Abusive, Bigoted, Cruel, Disloyal, Fanatical, Intolerant, Machiavellian, Manipulative, Murderous, Neglectful, Obsessive, Oppressive, Paranoid, Remorseless, Sadistic, Self-destructive, Treacherous, Violent

### Acting Consistently

To make the character believable, they must act consistently throughout their time when they have an effect on the plot. If you have a strong idea of the character's flaws and the underlying causes, this will help ensure they remain consistently "in character." For a background character you won't need to go into the reasons why they act as they do in any great depth, but for characters with closer contact with the protagonist, thinking about their background will help develop plausibility for the nefarious or annoying ways they act.

Consider how they will act in the scene in which they are involved and any other parts of the plot where they will have an effect on the story. How will the environment affect their behaviour? Will the presence of other people encourage or discourage their negative behaviour. Consider any associated behaviours and preferences that might naturally spring from their personality flaw. For instance, a snobby character is unlikely to be helping out in a community food bank, but they could be at the same table as the main character in a posh restaurant. A nervous person is hardly likely to be the protagonist's driving instructor, but they could be the fellow classmate the protagonist has to coax through some task.

### Some Examples of Minor Characters We Like to Dislike

Aunt Agatha (Jeeves and Wooster) – Domineering, controlling, meddlesome, rigid.

Arnold Rimmer (Red Dwarf) – Officious, spineless, complaining.

Jar Jar Binks (Star Wars) – The Phantom Menace – Clumsy, careless, thoughtless.

### References:

#### Writing the Unlikeable Character (and Why You Should)

<https://www.writersdigest.com/there-are-no-rules/writing-the-unlikable-character-and-why-you-should>

#### The Power of the Unlikeable Protagonist

<https://writerunboxed.com/2017/07/01/the-power-of-the-unlikeable-protagonist/>

#### How to Write an Unlikeable Character

<https://lauralizbuckley.net/writing/how-to-write-an-unlikeable-character/>

#### 75+ Character Flaws To Use In Fiction Writing (with Examples)

<https://www.wikihow.com/Character-Flaws>

### An Exercise in Writing With “Prickly” Secondary Characters

Write a story or a scene where your protagonist, is trying to achieve something, but is hindered by a minor character who is a bit difficult in some way. There are 580 negative personality traits list on the next page, so feel free to browse that for inspiration for the flaws that may be present in the various characters. You could go for gold and see if you can create a character with all 580 flaws. If you are after a prompt to help shape your story, here's a small selection that may appeal.

- Center your story around someone who's being haunted - by what or whom is up to you.
- Start your story with a character being led somewhere by a black cat.
- Your character is invited to a secret meeting. Who invited them, and what do they encounter?
- Write a story that includes the line "Have we met before?"
- Start your story with people arriving at a special ceremony.
- Center your story around two people who meet at a wedding.

## Writing Flawed Secondary Characters

Abnormal	Conniving	Disturbed	Humorless	Lazy	Over-Protective	Self-Centered	Threatening
Abrasive	Conspiring	Ditsy	Hurtful	Lethargic	Over-Sensitive	Self-Conscious	Timid
Abrupt	Contemptible	Docile	Hypocrite	Lewd	Over-sharer	Self-Destructive	Traitor
Abusive	Contemptuous	Dominating	Hypocritical	Liar	Over-thinker	Self-Harming	Treacherous
Adamant	Contrite	Domineering	Idiotic	Libidinous	Panicky	Self-Important	Turgid
Addictive	Control Freak	Dormant	Idle	Listless	Paranoid	Self-Indulgent	Unapologetic
Adulterous	Controlling	Doubtful	Ignorant	Loud	Party-Pooper	Self-Pitying	Unappreciative
Aggressive	Convulsed	Dubious	Ill-Mannered	Ludicrous	Passive	Self-Righteous	Unbearable
Agitated	Copycat	Dull	Illiterate	Lustful	Aggressive	Selfish	Unbecoming
Aimless	Corrupt	Eccentric	Illogical	Machiavellian	Pathetic	Shallow	Uncaring
Alcoholic	Covetous	Egocentric	Imbecile	Mad	Patronizing	Shameful	Uncertain
All Talk	Cowardly	Egoistic	Imitative	Malicious	Peevish	Short-Sighted	Uncharitable
Aloof	Crabby	Enervated	Immature	Malignant	Perfectionist	Short-Tempered	Unchaste
Ambiguous	Crafty	Entitled	Impatient	Manic	Perplexing	Show-Off	Uncivilized
Amoral	Cranky	Envious	Imperious	Manipulative	Perverse	Showy	Uncooperative
Antagonistic	Crass	Erratic	Impersonal	Mannerless	Pessimist	Shy	Uncouth
Antisocial	Creepy	Erring	Impetuous	Materialistic	Petty	Silly	Uncultured
Anxious	Critical	Escapist	Impious	Mean	Petulant	Sinister	Undeserving
Apathetic	Crooked	Evil	Imploring	Mechanical	Phlegmatic	Skeptical	Undiplomatic
Appalling	Crude	Exaggerated	Impolite	Meddlesome	Pitiable	Sketchy	Uneconomical
Argumentative	Cruel	Exploitative	Impractical	Meek	Placid	Slack	Uneducated
Arrogant	Cunning	Extra	Impressionistic	Melancholic	Plodding	Slandering	Unethical
Arrogant	Cynical	Extravagant	Impudent	Melodramatic	Pompous	Sloppy	Unfit
Competitive	Daredevil	Facetious	Impulsive	Merciless	Possessive	Slothful	Unforgiving
Asinine	Debauched	Fanatical	Inactive	Messy	Power-Hungry	Slovenly	Unfriendly
Attention Seeker	Decadent	Fascist	Inadequate	Mischievous	Predatory	Slow	Unglamorous
Audacious	Deceitful	Fearful	Inappropriate	Miserable	Prejudiced	Sluggish	Ungrateful
Austere	Deceptive	Fickle	Inapt	Misinforming	Preposterous	Sly	Unjust
Awful	Defector	Fierce	Inattentive	Misleading	Presumptuous	Smart Arse	Unlikable
Awkward	Defenseless	Finicky	Incompetent	Monotonous	Pretentious	Smelly	Unnerving
Backbiter	Defensive	Flirtatious	Incongruous	Moody	Prideful	Snappy	Unpardonable
Banal	Defiant	Flippant	Inconsiderate	Morally Gray	Privy	Sneaky	Unpredictable
Barbaric	Deficient	Foolhardy	Indecent	Morbid	Procrastinator	Snobbish	Unproductive
Bashful	Demeaning	Foolish	Indifferent	Morose	Procrastinator	Snooping	Unrealistic
Bawd	Dense	Forgetful	Indiscreet	Murderous	Profane	Snooty	Unreasonable
Belligerent	Dependent	Foul-Mouthed	Indiscriminate	Nagging	Proud	Sophomoric	Unrelenting
Big Mouth	Deplorable	Fraudster	Indolent	Naïve	Provocative	Sordid	Unreliable
Bigot	Deranged	Fraudulent	Inefficient	Narcissistic	Provoking	Spaced-Out	Unrepentant
Bitter	Derisive	Freak	Inept	Narrow-Minded	Prying	Spiteful	Unresponsive
Blame-Shifter	Deserter	Frenzied	Inert	Nasty	Puerile	Spoiled	Unruly
Bland	Desperate	Frightful	Inexperienced	Negative	Pushy	Spoilsport	Unsatisfied
Blasphemous	Despicable	Frivolous	Infantile	Neglectful	Quarrelsome	Stagnant	Unschooling
Blunt	Detached	Frugal	Inflated	Negligent	Quick-Tempered	Status-Driven	Unsophisticated
Boastful	Deviant	Fussy	Inflexible	Nervous	Quixotic	Stealthy	Unstable
Boisterous	Devious	Gloomy	Infuriating	Nihilistic	Racist	Steely	Unthinking
Boorish	Difficult	Glum	Ingrate	Nonchalant	Radical	Stingy	Untidy
Boring	Disbelieving	Gnarly	Inhibited	Nosy	Rash	Strict	Untruthful
Bossy	Discomfited	Gossiper	Inquisitive	Nuisance	Reactionary	Stringent	Unwise
Bothersome	Disconcerting	Grandiose	Insecure	Nutty	Rebellious	Strong-Willed	Vacuous
Braggart	Discouraging	Greedy	Insensitive	Obnoxious	Reckless	Stubborn	Vain
Brooding	Discourteous	Grim	Insincere	Obscure	Red Neck	Stupid	Vapid
Brutal	Discriminatory	Grouchy	Insistent	Obssequious	Redundant	Subjective	Vengeful
Bull-Headed	Disdainful	Grumpy	Insulting	Obsessive	Regimental	Submissive	Vicious
Bureaucratic	Disgraceful	Guilt-Stricken	Interfering	Obstinate	Remorseless	Subservient	Victim Mentality
Callous	Disharmonious	Guilt-Tripper	Intimidating	Obtuse	Repetitive	Sullen	Vile
Cantankerous	Dishonest	Gullible	Intolerant To	Odd	Repressed	Superficial	Vindictive
Capricious	Dishonest	Harebrained	Intolerant To	Offensive	Repulsive	Superfluous	Violent
Careless	Flatterer	Harried	Criticism	Offhand	Resentful	Superiority	Vicious
Chauvinist	Dishonorable	Harsh	Intrusive	Officious	Ridiculous	Complex	Vulgar
Childish	Disingenuous	Hasty	Invasive	One-Sided	Rigid	Superstitious	Vulnerable
Clingy	Disinterested	Hateful	Irascible	Opportunistic	Rowdy	Surly	Wallowing
Clumsy	Disloyal	Haughty	Irate	Oppressive	Rudderless	Tactless	War-Monger
Coarse	Dismissive	Hedonistic	Irrational	Outdated	Rude	Tardy	Wasteful
Cocky	Disorganized	Helpless	Irresponsible	Outrageous	Rumor-Monger	Tasteless	Weak
Cold	Dispiriting	Heretical	Irreverent	Overachieving	Ruthless	Temperamental	Weak-Willed
Complaining	Disreputable	Hesitant	Irritable	Overbearing	Sacrilegious	Tense	Whiny
Complicated	Disrespectful	Hideous	Jealous	Overcompetitive	Sadistic	Terrible	Wicked
Compulsive	Disruptive	High-Handed	Judgmental	Overconfident	Sarcastic	Testy	Win At All Costs
Conceited	Dissembler	Hoity-Toity	Killjoy	Overcritical	Scandalous	Thankless	Wishy-washy
Condemnatory	Dissolute	Hostile	Lacking	Over-Dependent	Scheming	Thievish	Withdrawn
Condescending	Distant	Hot-Headed	Languid	Overexcited	Scornful	Thin-Skinned	Workaholic
Confrontational	Distressful	Hubristic	Lascivious	Overindulgent	Sedentary	Thoughtless	Worrywart
Confused	Distrustful	Huffy	Late	Overreacting	Self-Absorbed	Threatened	Worthless