

WRITING CHARACTERS

Sonya Gildea

Your characters need to feel real. You need to believe in them. No matter what kind of story, regardless of genre or style, your characters need to feel like living people to you, the writer, and, of course, to the reader. One way to do this is to give them authentic motivations, goals, fears and desires. Your characters must move your plot along its truest lines. At every stage of your story, you need to be convinced by their decisions and understand the choices they make. You also need to understand their mistakes and the ways in which they respond to these mistakes. Your reader needs a sense that there is no other way this character could have acted. At the same time, you are also striving for the magical ingredient: that the reader is surprised by the person you create. When we're caught off guard by a character, in a way that convinces and does not seem forced, then that can be the moment when the character really comes to life.

This is not at all easy. It can take time and many rewrites to flesh out a fully developed, 'round' character. E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) explores the idea of the 'flat' and the 'round' character. The 'flat' character can be described as uncomplicated and unchanging, often comic or tragic. Whereas the 'round' character is complex, changing and, most importantly, has the ability to surprise us. Both character types are often equally essential to the story.

Below are some helpful exercises to create new characters or develop ones you are already working with. This is followed by some questions to ask of your story to encourage you to reimagine the people in it. Finally, a range of solutions is given to tackle the problem of unconvincing or underdeveloped characters.

A. Character Creation and Development

- **Write about a character in free association for ten minutes.** That is, write absolutely anything about them that comes into your head. Continue writing without stopping and without editing. Don't worry about mistakes, inaccuracies, or anything that sounds strange. Just keep writing. Put this document away for a period of time and come back to it fresh. Read it through and see what riches you can take from it, adapt, and use.
- **Write a character description of a person you know very well.** Seek precision, nuance, detail, and emotion. You are learning to write for the reader who does not know nor has ever met this person. Write about the character thoughtfully: all that you know – like, love, or intensely dislike – about them. Now, whittle that knowledge and understanding down to a memorable, rich portrait. It can be anything you need it to be – funny, poignant, loving, bitter – but seek to really capture the person they are in less than a paragraph.

- **Imagine you're going for coffee with your main character.** Ask yourself: Where would you go? What might you talk about? What would you learn? What questions might you ask? What information do you want to know? Do they make you laugh? Are you surprised by them? How do they take their coffee?
- **Describe three of your favourite characters from novels, short stories or films.** Describe them in your own words: first of all, in four sentences; then, in three; then, in two. This will make you pare down to the most interesting, most salient details. Try this again, but now without adjectives. Does this help – perhaps, force – you to choose your language with more accuracy? Now, add one or two well-chosen adjectives back. Are you starting to feel that 'the character' is emerging?
- **Conduct background research.** Set out to harvest detail and specifics so as to hone and clarify the character you are writing across every aspect of their life. Investing time, thought and imagination into your character research will bring wonderful material to work with. Research this person's livelihood, social, economic and political circumstances. What are their likes, their dislikes, their work problems, their eating habits, their joys? You are searching out information, so that you can know and understand them better.

B. Reimagining your Characters

It is creatively important to reimagine your characters in any number of different ways to explore what aesthetic options and ideas this gives you. It is important to question and, perhaps, challenge your own default settings as a writer in terms of race, gender and gender variations.

Keep yourself on your creative toes by asking the following questions:

- Do you have too many characters? Could you remove a character? Or more than one? Also, are their names too similar? If all their names are single syllables, for instance, they might easily be confused with each other.
- Could you merge characters? Bringing key traits from two (or more) different characters together into one character can often prove fruitful.
- When you change your characters' ages or genders, what happens to your story? Play these scenarios out in your mind and see what interesting and creative opportunities arise.
- Along similar lines, ask yourself, what happens to your story when you change your characters' socio-economic backgrounds? Their national or ethnic identities? Their sexualities? Their mother-tongues? Their resources and circumstances? Their names?

C. How to Avoid Unconvincing and Underdeveloped Characters

A character is unconvincing when they behave, act or react in a certain part of the story in a way that is fundamentally 'out of character'. Perhaps they do, think, or say something that doesn't ring true. Or perhaps some of your characters are underdeveloped and 'flat'. They may be stereotypes, who feel consistently unconvincing and inauthentic throughout the story.

- **Work on character motivation.** If a character's motives and reasons are unclear in any given scene, their actions and words may fail to convince the reader. So, make sure you know what motivates your character: what do they want or hope to get out the situation? Why is the character doing what they do? What do they fear might or might not happen? You don't have to spell all this out to the reader, of course, but you do need to know it.
- **See, experience and feel the world of the story through your character's eyes.** What is your character thinking? What are they feeling? If they are not the main point-of-view character, try rewriting a key scene through their eyes, perhaps in the first person, so you can access how they think and feel about things. Alternatively, articulate out loud what they are feeling at key moments. Inhabit them fully and they will act more authentically.
- **Get to know them more fully.** Ask yourself in what other interesting ways might you deepen your understanding of this person? You want to see and feel what they see and feel. For instance, listen to a character's favourite song or piece of music, before or during writing. Or you could create their playlist or dip into their favourite book. Apply this idea to any aspect of their 'life' and allow the process to bring that character closer.
- **Give them something to do:** wash the car, collect the children, drive the bus, paint the house, butter the toast, look at the clouds darken. Give them action while they are thinking, talking, or feeling and see how they start to respond to their situation. You are placing them into an everyday situation and giving them real-life texture to work with. They might begin to loosen up in a more convincing way.
- **Create unique looks.** Flat characters are often stock types who have physical descriptions we have encountered time and again. We hardly think as we write them. For instance, the bespectacled, mousy-haired librarian; the villain with shifty eyes and bad breath. Instead, use description imaginatively. Set out to write physical description that is striking, specific, detailed and brief, suggestive of the inner person.
- **Write strong dialogue.** Dialogue is one of the most exciting ways of bringing your character to life on the page. You want to hear, feel and understand the character in all that they say. Speak your dialogue out loud and listen carefully for anything that sounds false or out of character. Avoid monologues that are overlong and/or don't feel true to the character. Avoid too many or overly complex speech tags. Pare back your dialogue to what is essential to that person right there in that scene. What they say should deepen our understanding of the character. Finally, avoid using dialogue as exposition or set up, and instead allow your characters to talk naturally and convincingly. Trust your characters. Let us hear them on the page.