

The Writing Academy presents the
ultimate guide to writing compelling
novels and short stories for publication
and sale.

Fiction 101

Module Three

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The Writing Academy

Welcome to the third module of Fiction 101 – taking you from ideas to completed fiction manuscripts and beyond.

I hope you're enjoying the course.

Up until now we've looked at motivation, creating realistic writing goals for yourself, and acquiring the professional writer's mindset. Now, we're going to look at the first of the more practical writing matters:

Characters

For the record, I should state my position on storytelling. If you're familiar with my approach to fiction, it should be obvious to you by now but here goes:

There is no story without characters, therefore, do not try to plot a story until you have its characters firmly in mind.

Novice writers are often asked to complete exercises that they may never use once they are professional. As always in my courses, it is not my intention to teach you anything but the easiest and most practical writing methods. As a result, I won't be expecting you to complete long and pointless character analyses. We'll keep it simple – at least for now!

For a full analysis of creating characters with the Academy, go HERE: <http://rob-parnell-writing-academy.thinkific.com/courses/character-creation?coupon=globaldiscount>

(You will need to copy and paste this link into your browser)

Creating Characters

There are a lot of exercises and strategies available out there that do little to bring a character into sharp focus. I don't hold with these 10 to 12 page questionnaires where you're supposed to list everything about a character - including their shoe size, likes and dislikes, blood type and star sign. Mainly because I don't feel this is useful work. It's often just putting off what's necessary later: the writing, where character description and development become more pertinent and relevant to the story.

So, what's the best way to go about inventing – and describing – characters?

Think about the people you know and like. How much do you really know about them? How would you describe them? Most of us can sum up what people are like, even those closest and most familiar to us, in a couple of short lines. Why not do the same for your own creations? Why waste valuable writing time on character information you may never use?

Short descriptions – call them prompts – are enough. For instance, John is tall, fair-haired and handsome in a Harrison Ford kind of way. He's an accountant and likes to jog at the weekends.

Or, Maddie is twenty-six, a slinky blonde, a bit full of herself if you ask me. She likes to party, talks fast in a loud voice and mostly wears black. I guess she thinks it makes her look sexy. Or deep.

When it comes to your own characters, it's not how much of them you can describe – but what they mean to you that's important. Of course, for the purposes of outlining characters to ourselves it's important that we commit to paper how that person looks, acts and feels – in note form if necessary. It's more than enough to be going along with at this early stage. What's more important is that we can 'see' the characters in our mind's eye and we *know* them in the same way as we know our family members and friends.

For the purposes of keeping things simple, here's how to outline a character to yourself, without spending hours filling out questionnaires:

1. *Name*
2. *Age*
3. *Race*
4. *Body type*
5. *Agenda*
6. *Motivation*
7. *Goals*

The last three items become the most important later, when you're writing. The first four should be enough to enable you to get a good 'fix' on your character, from which you can later build a convincing portrait.

Of course, these small sketches don't address the depth of your characters but that is what the writing is for. One of the problems with creating large character analyses is that once you've written down everything about your character, there's very little you will want to say about them within your writing. Indeed, much of your detail will be irrelevant to your character description and may even hinder your story. Characters should be flexible, organic, able to surprise you – just like real people.

I'm not suggesting this minimalist approach be rigidly adhered to always. During the writing of your novel, it might be a good idea to create card files of your main characters that list their main attributes, to which you can add notes to as you go along. Things like hair color, habits, usual clothing etc., become more relevant as you progress through your manuscript. Sometimes it's useful to have the cards somewhere at hand to refer to, in case you forget little details, just so that you are consistent.

I use separate folders in Scrivener to keep notes on my characters. I refer to them often, especially if I'm losing track of who is who, who knows who and what they looked like the last time I mentioned them!

Visualization

When you have characters in mind, especially if they're the protagonist and the antagonist, spend some time with your eyes closed trying to visualize them. See them in your mind's eye and consciously regard them with affection. Spend some time admiring them, making them as real to you as you can. Then ask yourself questions.

What do you like about this person? What are their good and bad traits? How will they react when spoken to, provoked, challenged? Get to grips with how their thought patterns work, how their personal agendas will affect the world around them and the people in it.

Getting a feel for your characters in this way better reflects reality. We all have agendas, whether it is to be loved, respected, challenged, or merely listened to. This affects the way we interact with the world. It is seen in our outer shell – the person who others see. When we look at our characters as though they're real people, we're more likely to make them believable to our readers.

To create compelling, real characters, we need to take this one step further. Most people live in relative harmony with their environments. The best fictional characters do

not. We need to put our real people in situations whereby they can work on their agendas and achieve the goals, but not easily. We need to put them at odds with the people and or the locations and circumstances they exist within. In this sense, it's not always necessary to create characters with great depth. Some strong consistent characters in modern fiction are thinly drawn.

For example, Dan Brown's character, Robert Langdon, is a two-dimensional character without much depth or even many personal issues. We know he is middle aged, is a professor, and has an attraction to unraveling esoteric mysteries. He wears a Mickey Mouse watch and Italian loafers. He's also apparently claustrophobic and afraid of heights – but who isn't? These traits don't make him much different from other people. What makes him compelling is that these characteristics are *relevant* and continually tested by the stories he is involved in. We have the illusion he is growing because he's being tested and overcoming obstacles and coming closer to truth – but that's all.

In fact, Robert Langdon doesn't change at all from one book to another. Dan Brown perhaps thinks, rightly, it would be confusing if he did.

Reader Identification

No amount of detail or exposition will help a reader bond with your characters unless they like them. This doesn't necessarily mean they should be likeable. But there must be a means by which the reader identifies with the characters.

In *The Outsider*, Albert Camus presents us with Meursault, a not particularly likeable lead character. He's shallow and narcissistic in much the same way as the lead character in *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman. What makes these characters work is not that they are likeable but that they're engaged in mundane activities – listening to music, reading books, going to work – that we can relate to. And as much as we don't want to consider the implications, we see *ourselves* in the characters and follow them into the murders they commit.

Harry Potter is perhaps the most famous current example of a character without depth but who remains compelling – purely because he is so easy for ten to fifteen-year-old boys to relate to. He's the teenage equivalent of 'everyman' – he has dreams, doesn't believe he's capable of them but inevitably finds reserves within himself (magic in most cases) to overcome his obstacles.

Character Empathy

Many great novelists of the past appear to explore character. Dostoyevsky, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Conrad, and Dickens took character analysis to the nth degree. Even today, many romances and even horror novels explore the human condition and how we overcome our limitations and desires to become more rounded people.

However, James Patterson, Patricia Cornwell, Kathy Reichs, Dan Brown, John Grisham, and Stephen King - to name but a few of the world's bestselling authors - show us that character development per se is *not* the focus of the modern fiction writer.

The important aspect is story – and how the story effects the characters. Your job as a modern fiction writer is to create characters that readers do not feel intimidated by and with whom they want to spend the duration of a novel. To do this, you must be honest – and use your own personality to give each of your characters a life. Give them those little foibles that make us all unique and personable.

Don't dwell on describing your character's past, even their present. Show them *doing things* rather than being, acting or feeling a certain way.

Read modern novels and you'll notice it's the little details that help draw us in to a hero's life. We like to know what they eat, how they organize their lives, what they do at work and how they interact with the people around them. Empathy is created by getting the reader to feel they know the character and how they will respond – and to be cheering them on.

You have much leeway in this regard because, if you write with clarity and logic, the reader is more likely to know how your characters will react, and support their actions, even if they wouldn't react that way themselves.

Character Depth

It's very easy to get hung up on character development to the detriment of story. Many writers say (at the beginning of a project) they want to explore character traits and emotions and forget that the way to do this effectively is showing instead of telling.

Too much focus on the internal emotional landscape of a character can slow a story to a stop. I see this all the time in novice manuscripts. Exposition can be very dull to read.

Rather than explaining how a person is feeling about an event – taking a more passive internalized view of characters – we should be concentrating on how we can show the person is *reacting* to the story's events.

Character development, growth, and change should be the *result* of the story, not its reason to be. In modern popular fiction, character development should be incidental to the plot, rather than the sole reason for the novel's existence.

So, don't get hung up on, "*I want the characters to experience grief, courage and whatever.*" Instead decide now to **SHOW** how the characters react and what actions they take because they're experiencing those emotions. Characters who act and actively seek out solutions to obstacles are far more compelling than those that 'think a lot' and appear to be stifled by indecision. People don't want to read about characters who can't see a way out of their problems. They want to believe in characters who move on and find a better result – just as they might wish they could do themselves in their own lives.

Readers want heroes, people who can save the world. Readers want protagonists who can defeat the bad guys, no matter what the odds. Readers want characters who make sense of their world and their lives.

There's no point reading about a static world where there is no growth and change. As fiction writers, we need to present heroes and heroines that are slightly larger than life, that are more capable, who have pro-active attitudes and who are always prepared to confront their demons, antagonists, problems, and obstacles.

Creating Characters for a Series

The goal of many professional writers is to pen a series. It's ironic then that one of the challenges for the serial writer is **NOT** to develop their lead characters too much.

Sue Grafton's character, Kinsey Millhone is a prime example. When the Alphabet series is over, there will be twenty-six books, all featuring a middle aged female detective who does progress through her life – into different relationships, altering circumstances etc., – but who essentially remains static, trapped in the late 1980s. She's the same person in every book.

As is the case with many of the serialized characters to we know and love today.

You may know many of them.

Sherlock Holmes, Rumpole of the Bailey, Kaye Scarpetta, James Bond, Harry Potter, Dirk Pitt, Jack Reacher, Jason Bourne, even Miss Marple – they are all essentially *static* characters who interact with new circumstances but rarely change their personalities, even their situations.

This is in direct contrast to many TV-based characters who do little else but change. Indeed, it's important to bear in mind this fundamental difference in approach to characterization. Novels – or movies - do not need deep or complicated characters but television does.

Interesting, Strong, Exciting

Sustained character development is ultimately a personal issue. For the purposes of most novel-length fiction however, you will be concerned with characters with goals that they either achieve or they don't.

One of the ways to make characters more believable and interesting is to give them individual quirks and mannerisms. All kinds of things will do. A way of walking, flicking their hair, little habits, ways of looking at people. It's important that your people are instantly recognizable and different. Everything from having names that are not too similar, to creating traits that are individual. Tall and short. Fat or thin. Personal or family problems, issues, whatever. Minor characters too, often should be more pronounced to make them recognizable. Oh, and don't be afraid to make minor characters a little 'louder', so the reader doesn't get lost in amongst them.

As a personal exercise, draw up two-hundred to five-hundred-word character sketches for the main characters of your next projected novel. Don't forget to include their motivations, the reasons for them, their agendas, and their goals. Remember, there should rarely be more than five main characters in a modern popular novel. More and you're writing an epic. Keep it simple – at least for time being, okay?

Keep Writing!

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