

Character Development¹

Why Is Character Development Important?

A story consists of a character interacting with events and circumstances. Character and plot are inseparable because a person is, to some extent, a product of what happens to him. Without a clear sense of who a character is, what he or she values, and what the character fears, the reader will be unable to appreciate the significance of the story's events, and your story will have no impact.

Like real people, fictional characters have hobbies, pets, histories, ruminations, and obsessions. These characteristics influence how a character reacts to and feels about the things that happen. It's essential to your story that you understand your characters so that you are equipped to understand how the character would react under the pressures of events.

How Does Character Development Affect Story?

Your main character's goal sets the stakes in your story. It doesn't matter whether your story stakes are big or small, as long as they matter deeply to your protagonist.

Your character doesn't have to save the world: perhaps she is trying to save her family from an eviction or fighting to keep her business from going bankrupt. Your job is to establish what's important to your character (ideally, it's something that your audience can relate to), and—and this is key—help the reader imagine what might happen if the character loses that important thing. In other words, *what's at stake*.

DEVELOPING DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHARACTERS

Stories have different kinds of characters. Every story has a main character, called the **hero or protagonist**. Many stories have a bad guy: the **villain or antagonist**. Secondary characters round out the story. These characters may help the main characters, oppose them, or be completely neutral, so long as they help the reader understand the protagonist or antagonist in deeper ways.

Protagonists. Some guidelines for developing a protagonist include:

- **Give the protagonist flaws.** Protagonists or heroes don't have to be perfect specimens of humanity. In fact, those protagonists tend to be boring. Great characters emerge from the trials they encounter, and believable characters have human flaws, just like people in real life.
- **Give the protagonist an arc.** A good character undergoes some sort of change over the course of the story. That change is called the character arc. You can also choose to create a main character who *doesn't* change, but that decision should be intentional.

Antagonists. Some guidelines for developing an antagonist include:

- **Give the antagonist morality.** Every villain needs to have her own morality, however warped. If a villain spends part of the story killing people, you need to give her believable reasons for doing so. Make the reader understand exactly what desperate need or twisted belief has driven the villain to commit her crimes, and make those motivations personal to her history and upbringing.
- **Make the antagonist powerful.** Readers want to see your main character succeed—but there's no story if there's no struggle. So your villain should be more than a match for your

¹ Original by MasterClass; adapted for class by Joseph Sigalas

hero—he should be even more powerful. This imbalance forces your protagonist to collect the skills, items, and allies he'll need to defeat your antagonist, which creates further opportunity for character development.

Secondary Characters

Some guidelines for developing secondary characters include:

- **Make them complementary.** Secondary characters serve the vital functions of assisting the protagonist with alternate skill sets, giving them a sounding board or emotional support, getting themselves into trouble so that the protagonist can help them, and even providing comic relief.
- **Make them oppositional.** Some of the best sidekicks in literature are oppositional, and will even undermine the protagonist. Think of Dr. Watson chastising Sherlock Holmes for his drug use. Giving secondary characters opposing points of view allows you to explore your subjects, settings, and moral gray areas from a wider variety of perspectives, which sustains complexity and keeps the reader interested.

6 Tips for Writing Great Characters

Characters, like people, are imperfect. They don't need to be likeable, but they must be interesting. Here are some tips for effective character development.

- **Develop characters who reflect your interests.** You're going to be spending a lot of time with your characters, so the fiction rule "write what you want to know" applies to them as well. Don't be afraid to invest your protagonist with familiar qualities, but prioritize your passions and make sure that your main characters emerge from the setting and topics you've developed so far.
- **Reveal their physical world through detail.** Different writers focus on different details to evoke character. Some writers are interested in revealing character via clothing while others attend to mannerisms or physical appearance. Whatever details you choose, it's important for you to know your characters' physical world and how they relate to it.
- **Give them the right skills.** Your characters should have skills that will allow them to function in your setting. If you've chosen to set your novel on the moon, then make sure your character has a space suit or learns how to use one.
- **Create memorable characters.** When creating important characters that the reader is going to meet more than once, be sure that they're memorable in some way. Try to give each one a quirk or quality that can be used later to help readers recall who they are. This could be a title like "chief of police" or a physical attribute like "ginger-haired."
- **Show the reader their inner conflicts.** One way to create intimacy with your reader—and to get them to care about your main character—is to use internal monologue. Let the reader see/hear a character's thoughts as they happen, which exposes that person's inner conflict, motivations, opinions, and personality. Internal monologue not only reveals character, but it's also a way to convey information about your setting, events, and other characters, too.
- **Subvert your reader's expectations.** The most interesting characters will surprise your readers. We don't have to pay attention to things that are stable, but when something unexpected happens—a wolf comes out of a grocery store, for instance—we pay attention.