

Fact of Story Writing 1^{*}:

Story writing is all about character.

Guidelines for Making Main Characters

Your main character is the most important element of your story. The guidelines below will help you create strong main characters faster and more effectively, which in turn will help make you a better story writer and make writing stories more fun.

Make your character reasonably original. We all have our favorite characters from the books we've read, the movies and TV shows we've seen, and from stories we've been told. An easy thing to do would be to take one of these characters for your story. But these are the creations of other writers. You'll learn more — and probably have more fun — if you create a character of your own. So, *unless your assignment is to do otherwise*, make up your own character instead of using characters created by someone else.

Make your character relatable. This can be a tough one. Your character shouldn't be a real person, but your character should be realistic and **relatable**. Relatable? That means someone readers can identify with—someone they understand in some way, maybe through a shared emotion (fear, sadness, joy) or experience (being bullied, feeling inferior, hitting a home run). Even though your character is made up, he or she still has to be relatable in some way. If they can somehow “relate” to your character, your audience will be much more likely to want to know what happens to him or her. So, make your character realistic.

Make just one main character. Even though many stories have more than one main character, your story—especially shorter ones—will probably turn out better if you stick to the minimum. You'll probably do a better job of creating one main character than two, three, or eight. At least at first, put your energy into just one (that's a suggestion, not a rule).

Stories (usually) need minor characters, too! In addition to your main character, most stories have one or more of three types of minor characters:

- Characters who help the main character in some way (helpers)
- Characters who hinder the main character in some way (hinderers)
- Characters who neither help nor hinder the main character but need to be included so the story makes sense (incidentals).

If you're up for a challenge, think about creating a character who shifts during the story. Maybe he starts out as someone who hinders the main character but ends up helping him in the end. Maybe someone who seems like an incidental character at first ends up being the real villain (lots of mysteries do this). There are lots of possibilities here and, if you can pull it off, readers love to be surprised by characters this way.

Character Traits

The key to creating complex characters: traits.

To make your characters rich, complex, and compelling, you need to know some information about them. But where does this all this information come from and how do writers make it up? One thing many writers do is consider different properties of human nature, things all people share in common and that therefore apply to all characters as well. These properties are known as **character traits**. There are many kinds character traits to think about, but here are a few of the most useful for stories.

TRAIT (n): a quality that sets one person or thing off from another;
Curiosity is one of her notable traits.

Physical traits. This covers hundreds of possible physical traits, so the trick is picking out those that are most relevant to the story. The important thing is not the trait itself, but how that trait affects the character and the story. A character's eye color or hair color may never (or may) factor into the plot in any way. The same is true of the character's age if it makes doing something the character wants to do difficult or impossible.

- What is your character's name?
- Age
- Height and weight
- Hair color, eye color?
- Anything else that's important to the story?

Social traits. This is about how your character interacts with other people. How your character functions socially in your story will determine many things about the plot. For example, characters who aren't very social tend to be very independent as well. They do things on their own and this usually works out well for them until they come up against something they need help with.

- Who are your character's friends? Does your character have any at all? Too many?
- How does your character get along with family members? What about strangers?
- Is your character an introvert or an extrovert?

Emotional traits. This is about how your character feels.

- What makes your character happy, sad, angry, or scared?
- What does your character do when he or she feels this way?
- Describe how your character feels about himself or herself, at least most of the time? This feeling will have a big impact on what your character thinks, acts, and says.

Intellectual traits. This is about how (and how well) your character thinks.

- How does your character think? Is your character deliberate and analytical? Or casual and impulsive? How does your character react to new information, puzzles, ambiguity, and other mental challenges?
- What things does your character know a lot about?

** Original concept by Steve Peba. Revised and expanded by Joseph Sigalas*

- In what areas is your character confused or unaware?
- How educated is he or she? How smart? Very, average, or below average? How capable of learning?

Moral traits. Even though many people rarely think about it, everyone has a moral philosophy—a set of beliefs about how to treat others, what consideration we owe others, how we relate to others, and how all of these govern the way we view life, make decisions, and conduct ourselves.

- What are your character's strongest beliefs about life and about the world in which he or she lives?
- How do those beliefs affect how your character acts and feels?

Tips for Making Better Characters

You don't have to use all of these tips, but picking two or three can help you develop more interesting characters.

Give your character a quirk. A “quirk” is a peculiar behavior. A fancier word for it is “idiosyncrasy.” In the context of creating a character, it just means some little thing your character does that's rather unusual. Think of a character who only makes right turns when he drives. Or a character who collects twigs. Usually, the best quirks are those that are funny and rather harmless. We all have little quirks; they make us who we are as individuals. And that's why we're interested in characters who have them, too.

Give your character a past. Everybody has a past, some set of memories, feelings, and things that have happened before the present moment. Your character has a past too, and all these memories, feelings, and happenings affect how your character behaves. Maybe your main character saw a scary TV show when she was little and that's why she's afraid of the dark. Or maybe he got sick once eating a salad and now never eats vegetables. Good things happen in the past, too. Maybe your character has always been loved and treated well by his parents and that has made him optimistic, courageous, and confident. **The point is, you don't have to tell the reader *all* about it,** but if you know something about your character's past, you'll have an easier time knowing what your character would do in whatever situation you put him or her in. At the same time, your readers will better understand your character's present and be more interested in your character's future.

Give your character a secret. It's fascinating when a character in a story knows something that no one else knows and doesn't want to tell. Sometimes it's a real secret, like the name of a person who committed a crime in a mystery, but sometimes it's a secret that the character believes to be true or important, but other characters know it really isn't.

Give your character a habit. Like our quirks, our habits define us in certain interesting ways. Everybody has habits, little things we always do, and always in a certain way. Habits are interesting parts of our personalities because they represent involuntary behaviors — things we do without knowing we're doing them — that came about because we chose to do them so often at some point in the past. The habit you choose for your character should show your readers something important about your character's personality or circumstances. For example, having your character repeatedly and unconsciously check his watch during the workday might be a way to show that he doesn't like his job.

Give your character a fear. Fear is perhaps the strongest human emotion. And you can make your characters stronger by giving them fears, too. Fears usually come from the past. Sometimes something happened that makes us forever afraid. At other times — and these are the most interesting, I think, when it comes to character development — nothing real happened at all, we just thought something happened and allowed ourselves to be afraid of that. Readers love characters who have fears, struggle with them, and eventually overcome them.

Assignment

Let's make up a main character, starting with his or her name and age. Just make something up. Below, provide as much information about your character as you can.

Name and Age:

Describe what does he/she/it looks like:

Describe a typical day in the character's life:

How does the character feel about it?:

What does your character like to do?:

What does your character fear?:

How well does you character get along with others?:

Who is your character's best friend? Why?:

Anything else?