

Writing Believable Change¹

You've probably heard this one before: Your character must change throughout the course of your story. Characters *need* to change.

There's a lot of confusion over this concept. Writers can normally nail the change (weak to strong; bad to good; cynical to optimistic) but it often comes from a weird place that doesn't sit quite right with what we know about the protagonist. Or it's too big of a change (or too much of a "fairy tale ending") to be believable.

Writers think that great characters need drastic changes, but this isn't always the case.

Let's take a look at how writers should deal with character change, and how creating a character arc might make for a more interesting cast and plot.

No One Likes Change

In real life, people change in small ways, but they're resistant to that change.

Change happens slowly, in a sort of cocooned metamorphosis, like a caterpillar to a butterfly. It doesn't happen overnight, it rarely happens without lapses into previous behavior, and there better be a good reason for it to happen to begin with.

The thing that makes change in stories so fascinating for people is that, despite loathing change, humans want to believe we're capable of changing, preferably for the better.

So, your characters must change in order for the story to be worth reading.

But they don't have to like it. Sometimes, characters don't even change for the *better*, and things end tragically.

Think of this: Your character changes because of the things happening around her, not because she wants to. She is forced to change by circumstances she can't control. To survive and/or thrive, she must change to combat those circumstances. She must make decisions, and therefore, she must act over the course of a story.

¹ *Original article by Sarah Gribble. Adapted for class by Joseph Sigalas*

Events Trigger Change

Character change often happens because of an event. A big one.

It doesn't have to be as "big" as a death or massive explosion (but it definitely can be!). It can be something smaller, like hearing your friend's parents are getting divorced or the family's youngest child graduating from high school.

Note that your character doesn't choose this event. It's an outside force that's thrust upon him.

Then more events happen throughout the second act that force your character forward in a struggle toward transformation.

The triggering event is proportional to your character's change. Something small shouldn't send your character completely overboard. Something large shouldn't have him shrugging and going back to normal.

People don't like change. Your character won't choose to change because she wants to. Make sure your story includes an event that triggers a transformation, something that requires her to change whether she wants to or not.

Causal and Coincidental Changes

Shawn Coyne, editor and author of *The Story Grid*, talks about how there are causal or coincidental agents of change in an inciting incident. An inciting incident should happen in every scene, and, in a global way, it kickstarts the beginning of the story.



Usually, main characters start out in a story lacking something.

- Hiccup is considered a joke in the Viking community (*How to Train Your Dragon*), and because of this he is trying to do something he doesn't want to do.

- Rapunzel hates being trapped in her room in *Tangled*, even if she believes the world outside is dangerous. She also lacks a link to the outside world or a way to get other information.
- Harry Potter has no parents.

In all of these examples, we see how the main character lacks something—needs something—and because of this he needs to change over the course of the story in order to fulfill what he's lacking.

However, if nothing happens to the protagonist, he has no reason *to* change. He needs something to force him to act.

Inciting Incidents. This is where causal and coincidental ***inciting incidents*** come into play—along with a series of **escalating stakes and conflicts**.

A *causal* inciting incident is when a *person* or other being disturbs the main character's status quo. A *coincidental* inciting incident is when—you guessed it—a coincidence (like a tornado) forces a character to act.

Either way, over the course of a story the protagonist *will* change because events and actions force her to make decisions.

He become dynamic characters because even doing nothing means that the characters will suffer consequences in some way.

And while the amount a character changes from the beginning of the story to the end of the story will vary throughout the plot, change *must* happen if the protagonist is going to get what he wants or what he lacks.

Change Should Be Believable

If a timid man is forced to defend his friends and family, that doesn't mean he's going to start playing a superhero all over town. That means he now knows he's capable of stepping up with the going gets tough. He might grow into a superhero, but it won't be overnight.

A grumpy teen might change her attitude and treat people with a little more respect, but that doesn't mean she'll suddenly become a do-good saint. It most likely means she'll just stop snapping at her parents.

Harry Potter isn't ready to take on Voldemort for good at the end of Book 1, but he's learned a lot about himself and the Wizarding World by the end of the story, and he has evolved from the quiet boy locked inside the cupboard under the stairs.

Of course, maybe the opposite is true.

Maybe your timid man becomes the new Batman. Maybe your surly teen goes off to build houses in Haiti. It's possible. But remember, ***the more massive the change in your character, the more important and life-altering the triggering event must be to him. And the more gradual the change.***

You should know your character better than anyone, so make sure her change happens in a way that's realistic for her and proportional to the size of the trigger.

Character Traits: Do They Change, Too?

When considering character development for your main character, or multiple characters, you might be wondering if character traits must also change from the beginning of the story to the end.

Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

What's important to remember is that 1) not all characters are dynamic characters, and 2) a character changing in SOME important way doesn't mean his whole personality changes.

Consider Hans Solo in *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Hans becomes *less* selfish by the end of the movie and returns to help Luke take out the Death Star, but his overall personality hasn't changed. In fact, some of his character traits that are fan favorites remain constant, like his snarky personality and sense of recklessness.

However, some of Hans's negative character traits are smoothed out a bit, like his greediness and cynical outlook on life. He doesn't believe in the Force partway through the story (near the midpoint), but his perspective starts to evolve by the end.

He's still egotistical and at times selfish, but hey, there are other movies to follow.

What about static characters?

You can still have a story with a static character, although it's more common that these characters are supporting characters.

Think about how your main character changes from the beginning of the story to the end of the story. He doesn't do that alone—he needs static characters, often mentors, who can help him learn essential lessons that will help her change.

Look at King George IV in *The King's Speech*. Lionel Logue has a big secret that's exposed late into the story. But his confidence in how he teaches speech, his rigor, and his loyalty to the king act as inspiring constants that push Bertie to overcoming his pride and overcoming (though not perfectly) his speech impediment.

It's wonderful when characters put together in a story inspire change in one another, but this doesn't always have to be two-sided, even if a static character's life is changed because another character pulls him into an adventure.

Do Characters Change in Short Stories?

They can. Just because you're writing a short story doesn't mean that a character doesn't need something, so change is definitely a possibility.

However, while *something* needs to change in order for a story to be great, that something doesn't always have to be a character (in a short story, or even comic).

Like I said at the outset, characters don't *want* to change, and they *won't* change easily or quickly. Scrooge takes an entire book. Harry Potter takes an entire *series*. In a short story, you (and your characters) don't have that kind of time.

That means you probably won't see a massive character transformation in just a few thousand words. The characters in a short story won't necessarily change their entire way of thinking about the world, or upend their livelihood, or establish a completely different set of actions from their normal habits.

The change can be subtle, maybe a slightly different way of responding to the world. Or maybe it's hardly character change at all, just a new awareness of something they didn't know before. For example, suppose a story about an apparently happy couple in which the man has a disease, but his wife, who caused the disease, doesn't know it. He's tense. She worries about everything, especially his health. During the story, he reveals that he is dying. By the end, neither has changed (yet)—he's still tense, and she's still (though more intensely) worried about this health. But a truth once hidden has become clear, and the unity these two people once shared has been disrupted. Remember this key:

Even if the characters in a short story don't change, something central to the story must change.

Realistic Is Better Than Drastic

You know your character has to change, but your readers aren't going to empathize with that change if you step outside of bounds. This goes for fictional characters in works of fiction, and nonfiction characters in memoirs, too.

This is also why readers learn and grow from stories—they teach us how to overcome our own conflicts vicariously through character development. And different characters, like people in real life, change in different ways.

Above all, when writing, keep your change realistic and in line with your protagonist's personality.
