

DEVELOPING YOUR CHARACTER

BASIC CHARACTER BUILDER

From
THE DRAMATIC
WRITER'S COMPANION
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THE QUICK VERSION

Start to flesh out a character

BEST TIME FOR THIS

During early story development or any time you add a new character

CHARACTER: A MIX OF PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND SOCIAL TRAITS

You won't understand what your story is about until you understand who your characters are. Dramatist Henrik Ibsen felt he could not begin writing a play until he knew the characters inside out—as if he had lived with them for a month. To know a character is to know the complex blend of physical, psychological, and social traits that make him or her unique. The most important of these traits will be revealed to us through the character's actions under the increasing pressure of story events.

Great stories create extreme circumstances where characters are tested—and usually changed—and where they may do things, for better or for worse, that they never thought possible. To write such stories, you need to know your characters well enough to understand where in life they have come from, how they usually behave day-to-day, in what unexpected ways they might act under stress, and in what ways they would never under any circumstances behave.

ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Try this first with your main character. You can repeat it later with other principle characters in less detail. Don't overdevelop minor characters. They may steal the show if, after they come and go, we are waiting for them to return.

You don't need to write volumes as you answer the exercise questions. It's more about making choices and knowing what they are. For best results:

Set up a personal palette. For each character you build, choose one or two people whom you can use—in combination with yourself—as a source of information. Pick people who trigger strong positive or negative feelings. Give the character a name that embodies your choices and has special meaning for you.

Look for what matters most. The importance of each question will depend on the unique character you are developing. Try to find character facts that may influence story events. Don't waste time on details that will have no impact.

Focus on when the story begins. The character will undergo changes as the dramatic journey unfolds. The exercise is designed to help you flesh out who the character is before those changes begin to occur.

When basing a character on someone from your life, you may find the best material by using his or her real name in the early private stages of writing. Once you establish the character—and before others see your script—switch to a fictitious name.
