

# 6 Steps to Creating a Great Character

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You know you're reading a great novel when you just can't seem to put it down. Sometimes, it's the captivating plot takes you on an adventure and keeps you wondering what will happen next.

But the best writers know that behind all the twists and turns, what really drives readers' curiosity and appeals to their emotions are the characters.

## What Is Character Development and Why Is It Important?

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In literature, character development is the process of giving a character depth: you unpack their personality and the motivations that explain why they do what they do throughout the story.

This unveiling process involves tracing the main character's journey of change. Your readers relate—or don't relate—to the emotions, thoughts, and struggles of your characters. That's why it is very important for you to master the skill of creating believable fictional characters.

## How to Create a Character in Fiction

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Creating fictional characters requires skill and practice, but the following steps will help you get started in giving your fictional character depth:

### 1. Develop a backstory.

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Some writers only focus on throwing obstacles along the main character's path. The main character then responds in certain ways, and the stakes get higher.

But more than showing your readers *what* is going on, you need to show your readers *why* the character responds as he does. Effective character development means that your character's reactions make sense, which propels the story forward.

How do you do this?

First, develop your character's backstory. Some authors write pages and pages of backstory before they write the actual story. Others hesitate to spend much time working on backstory, fearing they are wasting time writing parts that will not be part of the finished product.

But just as each of us has a past, fictional characters become three-dimensional when you give them a past as well. These snippets can reveal themselves throughout your story, helping your readers to better connect with the characters.

You can start by thinking up *one* defining moment in your character's life, which ultimately led them to where they are now. It might be a traumatic experience, a happy memory, or anything in between.

From that single defining moment, you should flesh out at least two or three more experiences that help cement that character's beliefs.

These scenes will form a foundation for some of the future events in your story, and you may use them in your character's thought process through flashbacks or similar techniques.

Some writers make use of Character Profiles, a worksheet that helps you think through different details in your character's life. A reminder, though: make sure that you choose the relevant information and don't get sidetracked with unnecessary details that have no bearing on your story.

## **2. Establish your character's goals and motivations.**

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Next, establish what is important to your character. What is he or she pursuing in the story? What are they afraid of? What are their motivations and goals?

Just as a past experience shows where they are now, their present goals and motivations will anchor them firmly in the storyline. By showing how your character reacts to certain things, your readers will know whether those events serve or hinder the character's goals.

But your readers have to know what those goals are, and you can show them through the character's words or through the things that they do. Once readers know what the character is after, they can anticipate the character's reactions.

## **3. Use obstacles to unveil the character's personality.**

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Just as it takes time to get to know someone in real life, your novel should also reveal little bits of your character at a time. This gives your readers the illusion of getting to know the character as a real person over time.

Throw your character into challenging situations. Then give your readers insight into your character's thought process through subtle commentary.

You don't have to show every thought by giving tags like, "he thought," or "she thought." Instead, weave your running commentary into the narrative.

Show, rather than tell, your readers more about the character's personality through their responses to challenging situations.

## **4. Choose a point of view.**

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Point of view refers to who is telling the story. Is it told from the perspective of one of your characters, or an all-knowing omniscient narrator?

Different points of view have their own advantages and disadvantages. For example, writing in first person gives you the best access to your character's thoughts. However, it also limits their insight into other people's minds.

On the other hand, writing in third-person omniscient allows you to explore different characters' thought processes, but it takes skill to perfect the seamless transition between several characters.

Don't be afraid to explore different points of view. You may start off using first-person, then find that third-person narrator serves your story better. As a writer, you need to be ready to make changes as necessary.

## **5. Tie up loose ends.**

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One of the most common mistakes that new writers make is putting in too many details that have no real connection to future events.

Because humans tend to think in terms of cause-and-effect, readers naturally make connections in everything they read.

As you wrap up your story, be sure to tie up any loose ends you have hanging in relation to your character. If you find any detail that does not serve a future purpose, be bold in cutting out that detail. You will satisfy your readers more when they have everything neatly tied in together.

## **6. Practice, practice, practice.**

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After you have taken time to develop your protagonist, you will find that you need to make your other characters three-dimensional, too. Practice, practice, practice.

Set aside some time every day when you can write for at least an hour, and practice writing out scenes that portray your character's different emotions and reactions.

As you continue to explore wide possibilities, hopefully you will be able to make more relatable characters that will keep your reader coming back for more.

## **Can You Base Fictional Characters on Real People?**

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Writers may get inspiration for a story from a real event involving real people. As long as the similarities are not exact and not intended to slander another person, experts believe it poses no legal problems. But, *should* you base fictional characters on real people?

Most beginning writers think it's easier to create fictional characters based on real people that they know. Classic writer L.M. Montgomery, of *Anne of Green Gables* fame, says in her autobiography *The Alpine Path*:

*Ever since my first book was published I have been persecuted by the question “Was so-and-so the original of such-and-such in your book?” And behind my back they don’t put it in the interrogative form, but in the affirmative. I know many people who have asserted that they are well acquainted with the “originals” of my characters. Now, for my own part, I have never, during all the years I have studied human nature, met one human being who could, as a whole, be put into a book without injuring it. Any artist knows that to paint exactly from life is to give a false impression of the subject. Study from life he must, copying suitable heads or arms, appropriating bits of character, personal or mental idiosyncrasies, “making use of the real to perfect the ideal.” But the ideal, his ideal, must be behind and beyond it all. The writer must create his characters, or they will not be life-like.*

## **Can You Use Historical Figures in Fiction?**

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Many historical novels include real, historical characters in the story. Unless the book is a biographical account, they often have disclaimers at the start of the book. These explain whether all the scenes are factual or not.

Some historical novels for children use historical figures as the main character. Others use fictional main characters who interact with the historical figures.

## **Develop Your Characters**

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Taking time to thoroughly develop your characters, just like with worldbuilding, always pays off when it comes to your final product.

Characters who have depth and well-thought out backgrounds tend to be more relatable, and that’s what your readers will remember when they’ve finished reading your book.