

Creative Writing: How To Write Convincing Characters

By Samuel Hall

In creative writing, the stories we remember best are those with unforgettable characters-Skywalker, Scarlett, Scout. Characterization is inseparable from the story.



One way to give our characters form and substance is to begin with people you know. A trio of famous dreamers-Jay Gatsby, Don Quixote and Alice in Wonderland-all began as people their authors knew.

Whether your protagonist is headstrong or hypersensitive, intelligent or insipid, you try to make her such that she causes readers to catch their breath when she first appears. Larger-than-life? Indeed. Give her a longing or ambition that if it were you, you'd do anything in your power to make it happen. That will help you delve into the passions, fears, and hurts that lie privately at the soul of her being.



As we have limitations and talents, so do our characters. By wrapping each character's persona around us, we can know what they would do when the lions come, a job loss, the death of a secret lover, or when an old arrest comes to light.

Is her job a downer? And will she step on granny's neck to get what she wants? Jobs provide more than financial support - there's status, access, and insider knowledge. Keep five criteria uppermost as you choose her career:

- worldview
- natural ability
- class
- self-image
- credibility.

Aside from any character's qualities and weaknesses, show their level of self-awareness. If they have a minuscule awareness of their faults, and reproach themselves for those shortcomings, readers will give them added stature and admiration.

Other major characters will need to be given inner desires or yearnings that define them as distinctive. To project their humanity as more than just a cog in your plot, give them secondary problems that may or may not be linked to their main thrust or passion.

Your characters need not be bizarre to be interesting. Eudora Welty gives an external view:

Phoenix Jackson... was small and walked slowly in the dark pine shadows... with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She carried a thin,

small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her... A dark striped dress reached down to her shoe tops as did an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks. Her eyes were blue with age and her skin had a pattern of numberless branching wrinkles as though a little tree stood in the middle of her forehead.

That's Phoenix from the outside but why is she walking alone through the woods on a cold night? We must see inside. What drives her? Her motivation, which also drives the story.



A character chart helps to explore the major characters' fears, hopes, unspoken trauma, passion, resentments-giving enough complexity so readers will accept them in developing events.

Name your characters after real people who represent what you're going for. Movie stars can help you imagine how they'd inhabit their world.

Finally, what makes a good bad guy? The tougher he is, the braver your hero will appear. A good explanation is in Jerry Jenkins' thirty-one items on his "Bad Guy Checklist."

Again, in creative writing, motivation is key. Tap into your dark side long enough to know what makes a good villain tick.

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