

What Will Your Character Do When Disaster Strikes?

By [Carolyn Kaufman](#)

Most people have seen the character worksheets that encourage writers to identify everything from shoe size and favorite food to sexual turn ons and turn offs. And while knowing your character's most treasured possession might come in handy, it won't tell you how your character will react when disaster strikes.

For that, you really need to have a handle on your character's personality, especially the five to ten "central traits" that drive her behavior. To help you out, this article takes a 3-step approach to getting to know and working with your character's most important traits.

Step One: Make a List of Your Character's Qualities

Grab a pen and make a list of qualities that describe your character. Write down as many as you can think of, being sure to list personality traits (e.g. moody, prankish, logical, observant) and not physical characteristics like eye or hair color. You can also download a big list of personality traits (PDF) and check off the ones that fit your character best.

When you're done, you'll probably have a lot more than five or ten qualities, so you'll need to narrow things down. One trick is to collapse qualities that are similar into categories. For example, if you noted that your character has a great sense of humor, is a bit of a prankster, and likes to get into trouble, you could collapse all of those qualities into a word like "mischievous." If your character is hotheaded, emotional, and cries easily, you could say she's "moody."

Regardless of how you do it, work your list down to the ten traits that are most important to making your character who she is. If you're feeling brave, rank order the list; doing so will help you with Step 3.

Step Two: Subjective Assessments

As in real life, personality characteristics are filtered through people's impressions. To get a better sense of how your character sees herself and how that might differ from how others see her, use your list of ten key traits to answer the questions below.

Which of the top ten traits does your character value most? Why?

How does your character want other people to see her?

How do people who dislike your character see her? (Hint: They probably have a negative take on qualities your character sees as positive. For example, if your character is spontaneous, her enemies might see her as impulsive or reckless. If she is outgoing, her enemies might see her as obnoxious.)

Which of the traits has your character worked the hardest to develop? For example, if being strong is important to your character, what has she done to foster that trait?

(The answer, of course, is going to depend on her definition of strong. If being physically strong is important, then perhaps she's taken up weight lifting, but if being emotionally strong is her goal, maybe she's done therapy.)

Which of these traits does your character use to deal with everyday problems? For example, if she gets stopped for speeding, does she try to strike up a conversation with the officer? Is she deferential? Apologetic? Argumentative?

Step Three: Disaster Strikes

Now that you have a pretty good feel for your character's personality, imagine disaster striking. The best kind of disaster for a story, of course, is one your character is not equipped to handle.

Regardless of what the disaster is, most people's stress reactions are stronger versions of the way they deal with other things. It's like, under pressure, the personality defaults to whichever traits are strongest. So your character will default to his strongest central trait, or jump back and forth between two or three in his attempts to deal with what has happened.

So let's say that one of your character's ten main traits is "intelligent." And let's say normally the way she handles problems is to reason her way through them. If she's faced with disaster, she's going to try so hard to make sense of it that she's likely to eschew emotion completely. Or let's say your character is "hot-headed." If he normally gets angry when things go wrong, he's going to go ballistic when disaster strikes. Whatever makes your character unique is what's going to characterize his feelings and reaction following the disaster.

You may want to create a list of central traits for each of your main characters. Referring back to them will help you keep everyone's reactions straight when disaster strikes!

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