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BEGIN WRITING FICTION

An e-book for beginners and professionals

How to create powerful characters

Characters make a story what people make the world. They breathe life into an otherwise insipid environment. Powerful characters are always real, sometimes so real that you remember them as real people. How do you create such characters? What qualities should a character possess?

A character should have a history, even though you do not include it in your story.

Where does she study?

What qualities does she possess? Is she shy, naughty, talkative or stubborn?

What dreams does she have?

Where does she live?

What kind of relationship does she share with her parents and siblings?

How does she look as a child?

Develop your character from childhood to adulthood. Even if you don't include every detail in your story, it is important that you know your character inside out. Believe me, it will show in your story. When I spend less time with a character, I am sure people will notice it. What I learnt when I tried to take the short cut is, you can't!

Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Visualize her childhood in your mind. Once you have done that, move ahead and think of her as an adult. She can be anywhere between 18 and 26. The part of her life you are going to include in your story should be analyzed deeply.

How does she look? (Color of her hair, shape of her face, her height, her weight, the clothes she is wearing, color of her eyes)

In which profession is she?

Where does she live?

What qualities does she have? Only pronounced ones. (bold, shy, courageous, ambitious, lazy, complacent, aggressive, optimist, emotional, practical, rude, devoted, envious, fearful, faithful, energetic, talkative, naïve, boastful, gullible, pedantic, extremely decorous, selfish, loner)

Are there any peculiarities in her? (Does she intensely hate injustice? Is she overtly duty-bound? Does she have any dark secrets? Did failure in love change her forever? Does she touch her nose often when speaking to strangers?)

What is her ambition?

What does she intensely love and hate?

How does she carry herself in public?

What are her beliefs?

How would you describe her in one word? (That will be her most prominent characteristic)

Once you have finished interviewing your character, you will be able to see her clearly.

Every character is born out of three sources:

1. From the writer's imagination
2. From real life
3. From a combination of imagination and reality

If you have a fertile imagination, then you can create fantastic characters solely from it. But if what you are good at is observing people, then you can borrow your characters from real life. Maybe Uncle John is so obsessed with time that he even goes to the bathroom by consulting the clock. Find out peculiar personalities who can be turned into wonderful characters. If you can only think of one prominent characteristic in a person, weave a character around it by using your imagination. This is how you can do it.

A jealous girl you know can also be keeping a notebook with the names of all the girls whom she would like to leave behind. Sometimes, she makes maps of their houses, marking out loopholes so that she can steal the things she wants. One night, she even tiptoed out of her house and went to Martha's to see whether they were awake or not. Can she turn into a murderer? Is she suffering from Impulse Control Disorder? The answer is 'yes' if what you want to write is a murder mystery.

Choose your words carefully when you are describing a character. Try to replace generalities into particulars. The above paragraph could have written this way too.

A girl, around 15 years of age, is intensely jealous. Her notebook has names of all those girls she would like to leave behind along with the maps of their houses from where she wants to steal things. One day, she even tiptoed out of her house at night and went to her friend's house to see whether they were awake or not.

The second paragraph does not speak of the character. Instead, it speaks of the notebook, the houses, day, night and maps. If you want to highlight your character, fix the spotlight on her.

Another problem with the second paragraph is that the events are related, not shown. Your reader is screaming, 'I don't want to know, I want to see'. Don't relate events; show them through your character.

To 'show' your character to your readers, the only thing you need is details. That is why knowing your character is so vital.

"I will get out of the car right now if you don't talk to me," she said, her quiet voice quivering with anger.

From this dialogue, you get a sense of tension that the woman is in. You also know the place they are in, i.e. the car. You understand that the woman desperately wants to talk to the other person because she cares for him or her. You also know that she has a quiet voice, which means that she is a sober person. As the 'quiet voice' is put against 'quivering with anger', you can judge that she is restraining herself from demonstrating her emotions.

The mark of a good character is its voice. We are marked by our style. In turn, our style is marked by our preferences. A good character is so distinct in her behavior from other characters, that it becomes her style. The only characters you will remember after years of reading a book are those, which have their own individualistic style. That doesn't mean you have to exaggerate their characteristics. Even a mostly passive character like Jane Eyre is still remembered for her strength in restraining herself. She is remembered because she fought with her desires. Conflict is like stones lying under a river. Without them, the river won't gush furiously, creating sound and excitement for the beholder.

A good character should grow during the story. He should change after his experiences, either for the good or for the bad. Spiderman changed from an immature teenager to a mature and responsible individual. Jane Eyre changed from a rebellious child to a quiet and controlled woman. You must also have changed since you were a kid. Show that change through your story or save it for the end (depending upon the character).

Get a gripping plot

A plot is the Formula I racetrack on which you will run your story. While creating the plot on which your story will run, you have make sure it is as interesting as possible. A gripping beginning, twists, suspense, mystery, surprises, accidents, scheming, are all parts of a good plot. Your plot should have something new to offer. A story without novelty is as boring as a straight road.

Always choose a plot where there is plenty of scope for action. An old man is sitting on his wheelchair, watching television. That is not a charming beginning if you are not going to introduce another character soon. Maybe a thief is trying to get inside the house while the old man is watching T.V. Introduce action or the possibility of action soon after you begin your story. The reader is impatient.

Introduce conflicts

Conflicts create excitement and reveal our characters personalities. Build up tension by creating conflicts. Conflicts can be of five kinds:

- Between two individuals
- Between an individual and society
- Between an individual and nature
- Between nature and society
- With himself

Weave the conflict into dialogues. That will enlighten the reader about the personality of your character and will also move the plot forward.

In an effort to produce highly dramatic writing, don't forget that it should also be believable. If Susan jumps off her third floor flat one morning, the reader needs to know why. While developing your plot, ask the character, **why**. Why did you try to kill yourself? She might say that she cannot live without her husband who died a week ago. She will give you a reason. Listen to her. Include that detail before or after she jumps off the building. That will make the reader believe in your story.

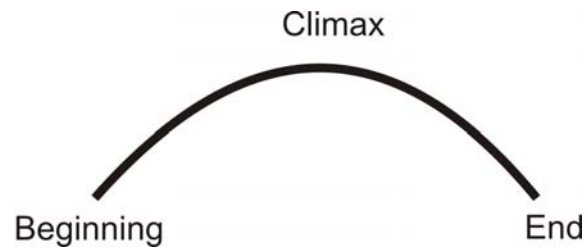
Creativity implies that you maintain a balance between surprise and believability. To do that, surprises (if they come first) should be followed by reason (whys) and visa versa.

While including information about the setting or characters into fiction, don't fall into the trap of providing unnecessary details. Unnecessary details are those, which don't move the plot forward, doesn't help you visualize the setting or tell you something new about the characters. If a passage or a sentence is doing none of these three, cut it out for good.

If your character is overtly religious and decides to become a nun, don't write long paragraphs on her praying or talking about God. Instead, use actions, which show that she is swiftly getting obsessed with religion. She might weather a storm to go to church. She might sharply turn down Bret's proposal for friendship. One fine day, she might throw away all her fancy dresses. These details not only move the plot forward, but also reveal the change in the character. Remember, tightness of plot will keep the readers glued to the story.

The structure of the plot

The clichéd but still largely employed structure of a plot is – the beginning, the climax and the end. Think of it as an arc.



In the beginning, you introduce the environment, the situation in which your characters are. It can be a classroom, a garden, the road, a car, room, office or any place with which you would like to start the story. You describe it through sight, sound, smell and touch.

You also introduce your characters, either through dialogue or narration. Your protagonist should have entered the story by now. He is the main person in your story and it is better that the readers get to know him from the very beginning. He might be alone, conversing with another character or at a party. It is not a good idea to introduce more than three characters in the first few pages. It becomes confusing and diverts the reader's attention from what the author is trying to show. Create the plot in such a way that a character has enough time to imprint his image in the reader's mind.

The beginning of a story should initiate a conflict. Remember the three witches in Macbeth. That scene started the conflict, which took us to the climax (the murder) and the resolution (the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of Macbeth).

Once you have established your characters, setting and situation, build up tension. Put the characters into situations, which will bring out the conflict. If Julia is torn between staying on with her husband and kids or moving to South Africa for a better career prospect; show that by putting her in situations which show her dilemma. Her husband and kids can throw a surprise party on her birthday even after she has told them that she has decided to go. Plot and character can do wonders for you if you use them in synchrony.

The end means just that. The End. By now, you have resolved the conflict through climax. After all, Julia decides to stay with her husband and kids. That's the end, but you can't leave the climax hanging in the air. You've got to wrap it up. Show what happiness Julia and her family is experiencing after her decision not to go. Maybe her husband can say that he knew all along that she wouldn't go. Maybe she gets another offer of a high profile job in the same city. Just give the readers an idea of what will follow after you close your story. Even in an open ending, there is a hazy clue of what will follow. Readers like uncertainty, but not at the end of the story.

Which comes first? Character or plot

It is like asking: Did the chick come first or the egg? The difficulty is that either can create the other. The same holds true for character and plot. When the characters act, the plot changes, and the plot dictates how the characters should act. Sounds confusing? It is.

The best way to simplify it is to relax the rules. You have jotted down the outline of the plot and the characters. Your characters are Mark, his wife, daughter, prisoners and cops. Mark is the protagonist. It is through his actions that the plot changes.

Mark is running away from the law, as he has been falsely accused of murdering his wife. The cops find him and put him in prison. *He becomes a victim of prison fights, as he refuses to join either gang. The prison life is dragging him into scum. He tries to escape, but fails.*

If you have been showing Mark as a fighter from the very start (like Rocky), then you can't show him trying to escape from the prison. If he is a fighter, he will fight, not escape. On the other hand, if you have shown his sensitive side to the readers (him being a caring husband and father), then he can feel disgusted by the fights and try to escape.

Here, your character is giving shape to the plot. You have to ask yourself. What would a person like him do when faced with such a situation? Don't put yourself in his situation to find the answer. He is entirely different from you and he will not behave as you would have. The story will continue in this way if he is portrayed as a sensitive man.

Seeing no option, he joins one gang and fights. He wins every time. He pleads with the cops to let him go, as there is nobody to take care of his daughter. The cops tell him that if he promises to fight for them and win the world championship, they may let him go. He practices hard, fights and wins.

Mark is a sensitive man, that's why he pleads with the cops to let him go. If he is a Rocky, then he will dictate, not plead. At worse, he might negotiate. Your plot will go something like this if Mark is all toughness.

The cops put him in prison. He joins a gang and soon becomes their top fighter. Seeing the possibility of profit, the cops take him under their control and force him to fight in championships. He fights for them and wins. Before the final of the world championship, he tells the cops that he wouldn't fight unless they let him go if he wins. Helpless, the cops promise to let him go if he wins. He fights, struggles at first, then fights like a tiger and wins the world championship.

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The plot is more or less the same, but the protagonist has changed. The only thing to keep in mind is that the characters and the plot should justify each other.

Find your way to brilliant narration

You have a story in mind and you can visualize the characters in it. Now you have to put your thoughts and images on paper or the word processor. The general belief is that you shouldn't edit your story until you have completed the first draft. I don't follow it. I stop, edit, think about my story whenever I like. The point is: Rules can be broken. Do whatever suits your writing, not you. I hated to edit my 250-page novel five times, but I did it nevertheless, because my book was getting better with every edit. If your writing is gaining nothing out of your rebelliousness, don't do it.

Learn to visualize

As soon as you start putting the first words on paper, you need to **see** what you are writing about. In your mind's eye, include details in your character (if you are writing about him/her at the moment). Close your eyes and try to think of the color of his hair, the structure of his face, his eyes, nose, clothes, weight, height, color of skin, his way of walking and his peculiarities. Once you have his image in mind, you can include those details in your narration. The more details you include in your character, the better will the reader be able to visualize him/her.

Including details

How many details you include in your setting depends on the length of your work. If it's a novel, you need to think of as many details as you can. For a short story, you can describe the setting through dialogues and a short narrative describing the world of the story. That much is enough to show the reader where the characters are. Here is an example from a short story of mine titled 'A Twisted Tale'.

Even the tiniest speck of light was swallowed by the blind night. The forest merged into darkness, fading itself into such a scary black that it didn't make a difference whether you kept your eyes open or closed. The narrow hilly road stretched down the middle of the forest like a surgeon's incision. The wind had now slackened and the forest fell into a deep slumber. If you strained your ears, you could hear the sound of your feet lightly crushing the gravel on the road. When you stopped, the darkness and the silence pulled you inside the dead world. As if to break the stillness, a lone dead leaf hit the ground.

I wanted to create suspense, so I used a forest at night as my setting. I created a narrow hill road twisting its way through the woods. Then I made use of senses. Sound and sight. I made use of the wind, the leaf and footsteps to show how silent the forest is. The night is blind and swallows even the tiniest speck of light. That shows how dark it is. And lastly, I introduced a human touch by showing how **you** would have felt being there. It is important that the reader **feels**, not just reads.

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