

Character Development: How to create convincing characters

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Have you ever read a novel in which the characters are lifeless or unconvincing? Good character development when writing fiction can be learned. Here are 7 steps you can take to develop real people who will bring your fiction to life.

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7 steps to developing real people who will bring your fiction to life

Creating characters that are believable takes time and discipline. Creating dynamically real individuals and not imposing your own thoughts and impressions upon them is not easy to do, and is often the difference between a novel or screenplay that sits in a closet and one that finds its way around town and into the hands of audiences. Spending your time building your characters before they enter the world of your story makes the process of writing an easier and more enjoyable ride, and creates a finished product that agents, publishers, producers and readers can truly be excited by. Creating three-dimensional characters for writing fiction

You must first agree to operate from the understanding that the three-dimensionality of your characters is not created magically. Talent equals discipline multiplied by time and you must practice (daily) the art of developing your characters. As a development executive with LA Film Lab Entertainment (a literary development and production company), I have developed a framework to assist you in creating rich and complex characters. The complexity that you desire comes through:

- Labeling their desire essences
- Labeling their fear essences
- Getting specific about their past
- Labeling their behavior
- Raising their stakes
- Not meddling in their lives
- Letting them play.

Asking provoking questions in line with these steps, answering them thoroughly, and then repeating the process, provides constant individual growth in your characters that mirrors life. Now let's take each step in turn:

1. Label the Desire Essences of each of your main characters:

The first key to deepening your work is finding the major motivators in the lives of your characters that drive their actions.

We all have deep aspirations that drive our choices, our thoughts, our actions and reactions. These needs are what differentiate us from one another and we will refer to them as "Desire Essences." Some examples of DESIRE ESSENCES are: the desire to be intellectually brilliant; the desire to be socially famous; the desire to hide from the world; the desire to belong to a group; the desire to be loved; the desire to party; the desire to die.

2. Label the Fear Essences of each of your main characters:

What is at the root of each of your characters' darker sides? For every desire they have they should also exhibit the

antithetical fear of failing at that desire. These fears will battle their aspirations for control over their behavior. Labeling and understanding the darker sides of your characters is imperative to creating the dimensional and imperfect characters you are after. Some examples of FEAR ESSENCES are: the fear of being stupid; the fear of being ordinary; the fear of being socially exposed; the fear of being rejected by a group; the fear of being loathed; the fear of being boring; the fear of having to face life.

3. Get specific with your Backstory:

Human behavior is made up of a string of moments and reactions to those moments. A character's current behavior is a battle between fear and desire and their immediate choices are made based on very specific (yet unconscious) experiences from their past – experiences that leave imprints much like DNA. Though your characters should be unconscious of these past experiences that are influencing them, you the writer must create these in your preparation of their backstory be fully aware of them. Here is an example of what won't benefit you vs. what will when getting specific with backstory:

Bad example of getting specific with backstory for character development: Rachel is a pretty girl who thinks she is unattractive. She prefers to live in her books as opposed to being with friends or family. Her father has abused her sexually throughout her youth. She hates attention.

Better example of getting specific: On her graduation day, at a party her Mother is throwing for her, Rachel's sexually abusive father shows up drunk and congratulates her, hugging her too closely, grabbing her rear end with both hands, and calling her pretty in front of a room full of her friends and family. She runs away humiliated and hides in her room, escaping into one of her fantasy books. That night she moves out to stay with a friend and doesn't tell her friends where she is going. Two weeks later she finds out through another friend that her father died in a car accident. He had been drunk.

In the better example of getting specific, the reader can have a visceral reaction to the words. This is caused by the detail. The generality of the bad reaction is logical, but lifeless. In the better example it is easy to determine what the essences of our leading lady might be: desire to hide, maybe even desire to die, desire to live in her books, desire to be valued for her intellect instead of her body, fear of loneliness, fear of her appearance, fear of the opposite sex, fear of losing a loved one, fear of being abandoned.

4. Describe their Current Behavior:

Take the essences and the specific examples you have now created and determine what kind of behavior your characters might exhibit as a result.

Don't limit yourself with these, but rather excite yourself with the possibilities.

Simple examples from our leading lady - a woman who: hides her body; avoids friends from her past; mistrusts anyone who comments favorably on her appearance; desires to control her education and her intellect; avoids alcohol.

5. Raise the stakes:

Emotions are extreme. Play in the realm of this extreme when dealing with the fears and ambitions of your characters. These essences are all encompassing; meaning that we spend our lifetimes with them.

Don't cheat your characters by being afraid to raise the stakes as high as you can. Needing to find a precious stone to sell to an art dealer by

midnight to raise the financing to save your character's mother's house before the bank takes it away from her tomorrow is exciting! Look back at your own life and think of how seriously you take your essences – when your essences are threatened will you fight to extremes to defend them, just as when they are fulfilled, do you enjoy some of your greatest moments in life? Play in the realm of the extreme. Raise the stakes. Your essences are life and death to you – let them be that way to your characters.

6.

Don't meddle:

Of course you might be saying to yourself, "How do I not meddle – I'm the writer!" But a truthful story is going to grow from your willingness to let your characters make their own decisions based on how you have defined them (which after these exercises will be in great depth). As their parent, you have to let your children go; this is the point at which your story truly begins. **DO NOT MEDDLE IN THEIR LIVES.** Continually remind yourself – it's not about you. You just serve the story. Let your characters make their own decisions. If you ever find yourself not knowing what decision they might make – question your homework and rework their essences, behaviors and stakes until their choice becomes obvious.

7. Let your characters play:

Once you have developed several characters by labeling their essences, getting specific, defining their behavior, and raising the stakes, you are ready to begin to let them interact. It's like the first day at a new school; ripe with possibility. When properly developed, there is no way to predict how your characters will behave in any given situation, but they are so full of life and their own agendas that they are ready to interact with other characters who have been developed to the same level. If you have done the work to get to this place – this is where your characters will begin to write themselves. **BEFORE AND AFTER** – are your characters underdeveloped?

Problem

Example Exploration: Let's begin with a general concept of a man and a woman who have not been developed. Our genre will be romantic drama. We'll put these two people in a used book shop for their initial meeting and write from a general perspective.

Rachel entered the bookshop looking around. She needed a book for a dear friend of hers and though she had passed this book shop a million times, she had never been inside. She browsed around for awhile. She pulled a few books off the shelf trying to find a suitable gift. "Is there anything I can help you with?" said a voice from behind her. She turned to see an attractive young man in his twenties. "Are you looking for anything specific?" he asked. "No," was her reply. "You're very pretty," said the man. "Thank you," she said blushing.

Solution for Character Development in Writing Fiction

After putting these two characters through the process of labeling their essences, getting specific and raising the stakes, this is where we stop meddling and we let them play:

Rachel entered the bookshop looking around. She browsed trying to avoid other patrons (desire to hide). She caught her reflection in a mirror; her baggy jeans and sweatshirt hid her features well. A section of classic literature stopped her in her tracks like a magical window (desire to live in a different reality). Gently she pulled a copy of "Leaves of Grass," from the shelf (desire to be appreciated for her intellect). "A woman who enjoys Whitman is hard to find," said a voice from behind her (desire for connection). She must have leapt three feet off the floor (fear of the opposite sex). Jeremy was standing a few feet away. "My Mother and I used to read Whitman together," he continued. Rachel stood there feeling awkward. "Why do you read?" he asked her. His gaze was powerful (high stakes). "There is little else that I believe in," she mumbled (desire to connect). Her eyes never left the floor (desire to hide is strong). "Would you like to take a walk over to the pub (need of a drink)?" She raised her head (strong desire for connection vs. fear of the opposite sex and desire to avoid alcohol). "I have to go now (fear wins)." She ran from the bookstore.. Jeremy pulled some cash out of his wallet. "Here," he laid the money near the cash register and took off out the door after her (need to connect outweighs fear of rejection).

WORKOUT

Follow these steps to create the richer characters you want to be writing.

Find the Essences:

To find the essences of your characters, you have to look to their history and their genetics. Just like real people, your characters' current behavior is defined by their DNA combined with experiences you create in their past. We all have the basic fears and ambitions of survival, shelter, and food, so when working on these essences focus on the ones that really drive each character. Consider ethnicity, religious beliefs, and major life events. Address sex, drugs, music, parents, siblings, education, appearance and intelligence for sure.

Start by writing out twenty DESIRE ESSENCES that feel right for each main character. Then determine one polar opposite of each DESIRE to create your twenty FEAR ESSENCES. Go back and toss the ones that you now feel less attached to. Repeat and refine the process until you have at least ten of each for each character that really excite you.

Get specific about Backstory:

Get specific about how your character's essences have come to be. Create definitive moments in your characters' lives that detail when these fears and desires were initiated. Come up with five supporting examples of moments in their lives when each of these essences was tested and eventually vindicated in the name of the fear or in the name of the desire. Failure vindicates the fear and success vindicates the desire. Write at least one half page of text supporting each -Yes that will give you a total of twenty-five pages of essence work. Do the work.

10 Essences (a desire and a fear for each) x 5 samples for each = 50 descriptions (each a half page)

Label the Current Behavior:

Using their essences and their specific past, come up with ten sample behaviors for each character. Simple example: a character who has a desire to hide and a fear of being publicly humiliated, has a specific past incident of continually having their pants pulled down in public by a sibling. The current behavior - they might always wear a belt, or might always look behind themselves in a very specific attempt to never be humiliated again.

Raise the stakes:

After looking over your newly created examples, it should be easy to determine some issues that might be going on in their lives that would increase or decrease their stress. A decrease in stress generally excites people to take greater chances, while an increase in stress tends to shorten people's fuses.

List five possible increases or decreases in your characters stress level.

Don't meddle and let them play:

Now put two of your fully developed characters into the same room. Implement two or three increases in stress to one character and two or three decreases in stress to the other character and let them bounce off of one another. Go into this exercise with no preconceived notions of what might happen. If you have done your homework, they should affect one another.*

*If you need a jumpstart – add an element that one needs from the other and give the other a strong reason for not wanting to provide what that character needs. Could be tangible or emotional.

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About the Author

Corey Blake is the Founder and President of Writers of the Round Table Inc. For the past eight years, Corey has played a key role in the development of more than three hundred screenplays and manuscripts. He has won nine festival awards for his work in entertainment and contributed articles to nearly three dozen industry publications including Script Magazine, Writer Magazine (cover article), and the Los Angeles Journal. Corey's work has been featured in articles in Backstage West, MovieMaker Magazine, Hollywood Scriptwriter Magazine and Dance Magazine. He has been a guest lecturer at the Midwest Literary Festival, Screenwriting Expo 4 at the LA Convention Center, the Virginia State Reading Association Conference, and the Spring into Romance Writing Conference. Corey's name is attached as the author or co-author to twelve projects for release in 2008 and 2009 including fiction, non-fiction and screenplays. <http://www.writersoftheroundtable.com>

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