

How to Write a Book-Characterizing Your Characters

Contributed by Deborah Owen
Wednesday, 17 June 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 17 June 2009

Want to be a successful author? Mastering the art of creating great characters is essential to writing best selling books. Learn how simple details can have a profound effect on your reader's perception of your characters.

How to Write a Book - Characterizing Your Characters

Building believable characters is at least one-third of the labor involved in writing a believable story. It's not sufficient to grab a character out of thin air and try to build him as you write, nor is it wise to describe one living person and paint them as fiction. Your characters will lie somewhere in between.

It wouldn't fit the characterization if you painted a girl as a wallflower and had her enter a party drunken and loud. Rather, she would be the type who would avoid introductions, stay away from the punch bowl (too many people there), and try to look absent from the uncomfortable situation around her. Further, she wouldn't know what to do if a gent did approach her for a dance, or tried to draw her into a conversation.

Your characters should display personality, attitude, philosophy, emotions, psychological mind set, physical infirmities, and weaknesses as your story unfolds.

One of the best ways to develop a character is to think of someone you know and mix some of their attributes into fiction. (And one of the best ways to get sued is to describe a character or situation so well that it is recognized.) But don't just describe your character - SHOW the character to your reader. Do this by demonstrating attitudes, personality and philosophies.

Always reveal descriptions of your characters a little at a time. What do you see in this description?

"Thelma paced back and forth in front of the mailbox. At length, she inched forward, opened the yawning lid, and gently laid the tear-stained letter inside. Dainty fingertips released the lid and it resounded with a bang. She shuffled to the bus stop bench, sat down, and crumbled into tears. Ten minutes later, she stood, squared her shoulders, wiped her tears, and marched home with a snappy step."

The normal reader would not see any physical details in their mind, as none were given. They would see a dismayed young woman, and that the dismay is somehow linked to the letter she felt forced to mail. The reader would see her hesitation, and the battle within that ultimately leads to a victorious resolve. Without the author ever saying so, the reader would identify the motivation of the scene, and the driving force that concluded it. This is but one way to show a person's character.

If the woman had primped as she sat on the bench, we would see a different character. If she had laughed afterward, or chatted with a passerby, we would see a different character.

The pen is powerful. We could have changed her by saying she wore a tight mini-skirt, a low-necked blouse and a lot of makeup. Or we could have dressed her in a business suit, a nun's habit, or a McDonald's work uniform and in each outfit, she would have been a different person. We could make her older or younger, with or without jewelry and painted nails, etc.

Every time you change the details of a character, you change the reader's mental imagery of the person. Details are important, because they make the character more believable. Spend time looking at details in each person.

About the author:

Deborah Owen, founder of <http://www.creativewritinginstitute.com> - the only fully mentored writing school. Have your own private tutor at bargain basement prices. To receive our newsletter or a free evaluation of your writing, write to deborahowen@cwinst.com