

Developing Your Characters

Contributed by Deborah Owen
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Want to be a successful author? Writing great characters is essential to writing best selling books. Learn characterization techniques that give you an edge.

Developing Your Characters

How well do you know your characters? Can your antagonist swim? Can he ski? Does he gargle and brush his teeth every day? If you don't know that, you don't know your character.

Set aside 60 minutes and make a list of 50 questions about the main characters in your story. Questions like:

- " What food does he like/dislike?
- " What habits does he have?
- " What is his belief system?
- " Where does he live? City? Suburbs? Country?
- " What does he drive?
- " Who does he hang out with?
- " How does he dress? etc.
- " Where does he frequent?
- " What sports does he like/dislike?
- " When does he do various things in his daily schedule?
- " Does he have nervous habits?
- " Is he emotionally stable?
- " Why does he do what he does?

The character will not be real to anyone else until he is real to you.

Do this for the top three characters in your story. After you have made the list, browse magazines until you find a picture that reminds you of them. Cut the pictures out and tape them near your computer. As you write, stare at these characters until you can feel their heartbeat, measure the length of their stride, know whether they have bad breath, dentures or tattooed eyebrows. Stare at those photos day and night

NOTE: Do this for three stories, and you will never have to do it again. You will have learned the secret of characterization.

Using Real People to Cast Fictitious Characters No single person will look like the character you see in your mind. As you observe the public, choose the eyes of one individual, the body from another, and the accessories from yet another. Look for jewelry and shoe styles on unwary travelers. Frequent bus stops and airports and do nothing but watch people. (Be sure to take a notebook. Every serious writer carries a notebook or steno pad.) Go to whatever places will have the type of people you need. Do you need a grieving widow? Attend a graveside funeral from afar off. Do you want to create a devout Christian? Go to church. Whether you need ghetto situations, wealthy neighborhoods, doctor's offices or sanitariums, go there to get your characters.

Note: A good way to get sued is to describe one individual, or one family, OR their set of circumstances. Resist the urge, or save up a big chunk for lawyer's fees.

Runaway Characters

If you have written very long, you have already learned that characters will write their own story, if you permit it. I call them runaway characters.

In one of my early writing attempts, I needed to kill a five-year old girl in a car accident. I had grown to love the child. There was no way I could kill her, although the story demanded it. My solution? I laid the novel down and never looked at it again for five years. When I returned, I had learned to plot the course of my story - and not let the characters plot me. I also learned how to eliminate characters when need be. I killed the little girl and got on with business. (But she had a nice funeral.)

You can prevent problems like these by knowing the middle and end of your story before you pick up the pen to write. Develop the first part last, and the story will practically write itself.

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