

# Character Development Workshop



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# The Five-Week Character Development Workshop

## Introduction

Character creation can be one of the hardest aspects of writing a novel. You may have a great plot and story line but if the characters aren't real and full-bodied, the entire work seems shallow.

*"Character is plot, plot is character."* F. Scott Fitzgerald

Developing great, memorable characters can be a struggle. The Character Workshop will help you create characters through the use of activities that allow you to get into your character's head. We will start with some basic information, and build on that base each week. By the end of six weeks you should have a **protagonist** and an **antagonist** that you know inside-out.

### **How can I tell if my characters need development?**

Try this quick exercise. Call a close friend or a family member and try to describe your character to them. They will likely ask you many questions if your description is lacking and they are unable to get a clear mental image of the person you're describing. Next, describe the type of person your character is. Again, you'll likely be asked many questions if your description is lacking.

### **How much time should you spend creating characters?**

The simple answer is, 'as long as it takes to make them real.' Don't be surprised if you spend a great deal of time on your characters—you may even spend more time creating the characters than you do creating an outline for your story. That's fine—your readers will thank you for it.

### **Should I base my characters on real people?**

Some writers choose to do so, while others create completely fictional characters. In either case, it's fine to use visual stimuli such as images of celebrities or even people you know.

This course is designed to rotate back and forth each week from giving the characters physical characteristics to giving them emotional and personality traits. All buildings need a solid foundation; otherwise the building will not stand. Characters are the same way—they need a few base elements.

## Week One Character Basics

You will give your character a name, birthplace and a few physical characteristics. This is the first part of character development for most writers. Certain names usually invoke certain feelings about a person and their personality. So, this is where we'll begin.

### **How do I choose the perfect name for my characters?**

Character names can be especially challenging if you're writing a period piece. Some names simply were not in use during certain centuries. One of the easiest ways to determine what names were popular and in common use during what time period is to run an online search. Example: *Popular names of the 1800s*.

### **Should I stick to common or well known names?**

While a common or well known name may have quicker reader recognition, it's the uncommon name that often creates a lasting memory in the mind of your reader. It's also fine to give your characters nicknames, or refer to them by initials. However, if you use a nickname or any other variation on their full name, use it consistently throughout the book.

### **Can I have two characters with the same name?**

It's not uncommon in our everyday lives to encounter two or more people with the same first name. It's not unheard of to encounter two people with the same first *and* last names. Therefore, it's completely acceptable in a book as well. If you feel the need to do this, devote some extra time and thought into how these characters will interact with each other. If the interaction involves heavy dialogue, you may run into some clarification issues – especially in first-person.

### **Do my characters have to be human?**

This workshop was designed with human characters in mind, yes. However, it can be used for the development of 'humanoid' characters as well.

### **Assignment 1:**

Print out two copies of **Worksheet One – Character Basics**.

Create a Protagonist and an Antagonist. Complete this worksheet before moving on to the next assignment.

### **Assignment 2:**

- A. Have the protagonist and antagonist write a paragraph about themselves. Imagine they're filling out the About Me section on a social media profile.
  
- B. Have the protagonist and antagonist write a paragraph about each other. Imagine each are describing the other to a friend.

## Worksheet One – Character Basics

Create a Protagonist and an Antagonist

Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_

- Protagonist
- Antagonist

### **BASICS**

Nickname: \_\_\_\_\_

Birth date: \_\_\_\_\_

Birthplace: \_\_\_\_\_

### **PHYSICAL**

If it helps you to describe and picture your characters, you can use celebrity/model photographs.

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Height/Weight/Physical Build: \_\_\_\_\_

Eye color: \_\_\_\_\_

Hair color & style: \_\_\_\_\_

Skin Tone: \_\_\_\_\_

Dress style: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite clothing or outfit: \_\_\_\_\_

### **EDUCATION & OCCUPATION**

Educational background: \_\_\_\_\_

Current occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Other occupations: \_\_\_\_\_

Special skills or talents: \_\_\_\_\_

## **BACKGROUND**

Childhood experiences:

Relationship with parents:

Siblings:

## **SUMMATION:**

Write a brief paragraph summarizing the character based on what you've learned about them from this exercise. This is from your perspective as the writer and creator of these characters.

**Protagonist:**

**Antagonist:**

## Week Two Bones and Structure

Last week we began creating two characters; a protagonist and an antagonist. We gave them some very basic information and had them write about themselves and each other.

This week, we're going to start giving them a few bones and a little more structure by delving a bit into how they think and feel. Characters need motivation to act and react the way they do. Well-rounded characters have a past and that past effects how they act and react today. Characters without these things will feel and read very shallow and disconnected. Characters will need flaws and difficulties too, so don't be shy about giving them some.

### **What if none of this will be used in my book?**

This exercise isn't necessarily intended to create content for your book, although, it may achieve this in the end. This exercise is meant to give you, the writer, a better idea of what kind of people your characters are. What makes them tick? You've likely heard the phrase, '*true to character*', and the purpose of this exercise to help you remain true to the character of your characters. Say that five times fast!

### **Assignment 1:**

Print out two copies of **Worksheet Two – Bones & Structure**.

Fill out the worksheets for the Protagonist and Antagonist. Keep them together with the previous worksheet. Complete these before moving on to the next assignment.

### **Assignment 2:**

A: Write in first person telling about each characters internal conflict. Try to keep each short paragraph limited to 100 words. It's okay if it's a bit longer or shorter (you may get on a roll) but the general idea is to keep it as short as possible.

B: Finish these statements for the protagonist and the antagonist: (This page can be printed)

I wish I had never. . .

I don't know what to do about. . .

I wish I could take back. . .

I feel like I'm losing my mind, because. . .

## Worksheet Two – Bones & Structure

The Protagonist and Antagonist.

Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_

- Protagonist
- Antagonist

1. How did the character get along with his parents?
2. How did the character get along with siblings, classmates, other friends?
3. What internal conflicts does this character have?
4. What external conflicts does this character have?
5. What motivates this character?
6. Does the character smoke, drink, use drugs?
7. Does the character have hobbies?
8. What does the character do for fun?
9. What qualities of the opposite sex is the character attracted to?
10. How does the character handle relationships?

## Week Three Background and Past

This week we will go a bit deeper into the past. Knowing a character's past will help you know how they'll react in the present and future. You need to know their inner fears and passions. What made them the way they are?

### **What if my storyline offers very little back history on my characters?**

Your character's back story isn't necessarily something you'll need to add to your book. Your readers may never need to know where they attended high school or if they went to college. This part of your character's development is for you, the writer. By knowing the back story, you can better predict how your character will act and react to present situations. This aids in keeping your characters consistent to their nature. For example: A shy and reclusive person is unlikely to join a flash mob.

### **What if my characters are related and share the same past?**

Even identical twins can have variations in how they perceive the same situation or circumstance. When the past is shared by your protagonist and antagonist, you should still complete separate worksheets for each. You can even do a compare/contrast between the two in order to help you differentiate between their feelings.

### **What if one of my character's past is completely unknown, and never revealed in the book?**

This is sometimes the case with the mysterious stranger, the secret agent, or the ghostly entity. In this case, instead of skipping over the questions – try to insert observations. For example: **Describe where the character grew up.** You would want to add your observations such as; southern accent, tanned skin, good dental hygiene, seems well educated.

### **Assignment 1:**

Print out two copies of **Worksheet Three – Background & Past.**

Fill out the worksheets for the Protagonist and Antagonist. Keep them together with the previous worksheets. Complete these before moving on to the next assignment.

### **Assignment 2:**

In this writing assignment you will go back into the past of your protagonist and antagonist by writing a short, descriptive narrative about each of them. This will help you understand why they're the way they are now. This will be written in first person. Begin this narrative when the character is in first grade and write a few "brief" accounts of the characters life through his/her school years. Be sure to include emotions, thoughts and other things from **Worksheet 3.** Allow the character to describe their childhood friends, where they grew up, happy moments, sad moments—whatever the character wants to reveal.



## Worksheet Three – Background & Past

Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_

- Protagonist
- Antagonist

1. Parents' income level: (Did the character grow up rich, poor?)
  
2. Describe where the character grew up: (Neighborhood, small town, large city?)
  
3. Personality as a child/Relationship with parents:
  
4. Childhood friends:
  
5. Childhood pets:
  
6. High school:
  
7. Personality in high school:
  
8. What's he/she been doing since high school?

## Week Four The Interview

This week you'll spend time inside your character's head, almost like a profiler. You need to know what makes him/her tick. What is he/she afraid of? How does he/she feel about things?

### **What if my character is pure evil or completely angelic?**

You should still do the worksheets and assignments. In a popular thriller entitled, "*Silence of the Lambs*", the evil killer has a fondness for a certain breed of moth. This fondness demonstrates his ability to feel and give love, even though his psychosis rendered him incapable of showing such to human beings. In another popular movie, "*Michael*", the lead character is an angel with some rather peculiar quirks.

### **Can I use body language to demonstrate some of these characteristics, such as arrogance?**

Sure! In some cases, body language is the only way in which a person demonstrates their unique quirks and characteristics. An arrogant person may tend to scoff at or walk away from others whom he/she feels superior to. Nervous ticks are generally physical, as well as OCD behaviors.

### **What if my character suffers from an illness or disease that causes erratic behavior?**

If your character is prone to unexplainable and radical changes, you can list the ones that will most likely appear in your book. For example: Your character suffers from Tourette syndrome. **Do you verbally abuse people?** You would want to list things such as uncontrollable cursing, involuntary insults, etc.

### **What if my character is incapable of feeling remorse or real emotion?**

Generally, people who are incapable of feeling remorse or real emotion learn how to emulate by watching others, and then going through the motions. In this case, you may wish to make a note of who/what your character might be emulating.

### **Assignment 1:**

Print out two copies of Worksheet Four – The Interview. Fill out the worksheets for the Protagonist and Antagonist. Keep them together with the previous worksheets. Finish this assignment before moving on to the next.

### **Assignment 2:**

Write a paragraph for each character (protagonist and antagonist) that tells how they'd feel if they did something out of character for them. The protagonist is usually the good guy; write about how he'd feel if he did something horribly bad. The antagonist is usually the bad guy; write about how he'd feel if he did something really good.

## Worksheet Four – The Interview

Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_

- Protagonist
- Antagonist

Did anyone pick on you or were you the bully?

When did you become interested in exploring your sexuality?

What are your most memorable sexual experiences?

What's the worst thing you've done in life?

What's the best thing you've done in life?

What's the worst thing you've done to another person?

Did you steal from people or your job?

How often do you lie?

Do you verbally abuse people?

Are you mean to other people for no reason?

Do you think you're better than other people?

Do you have any fetishes?

Do you have any quirks that others find odd?

Are you mean to animals or small children?

Is there anyone you'd like to physically hurt?

Do you care what people think about you?

Are you vengeful?

## Week Five Fleshing out the Character

This week we'll focus on the turmoil and conflicts of your characters. Your characters should really start coming to life by this point. The situations in this worksheet may not apply specifically to your character or your story, but it's good to know how they would react or the emotions they'd go through in these times.

### **What if none of these scenarios will be experienced by my character?**

The scenarios presented in the worksheet are geared toward evoking a certain emotional reaction. This same reaction would be evoked by any scenario of a similar nature. **He/she does drugs and ends up hurting someone.** If your character would react to this with self-loathing and remorse, it's likely they would react the same way to falling asleep at the wheel and sideswiping another car. The aim with this question is to define the manner in which your character would react to causing an injury accident due to some form of impairment.

### **What if my character keeps his/her emotions secret?**

In life, many people do hide their emotions and true feelings. The characters in your book may well do the same. However, as the writer, you still need some insight into how your characters truly feel. This allows you to accurately describe their body language and base demeanor.

### **Can I add real scenarios from my book to the worksheet?**

Absolutely! If your book features a certain scenario where you need to your character to act or react in a certain manner, you can add it to the list. View this entire worksheet as an exercise in free writing. Let your mind wander, and fully experience the scenario as your character. Describe the emotions they feel, and the manner in which they display those emotions.

### **Assignment 1:**

Print out two copies of **Worksheet Five – Fleshing out the Character**. Fill out the worksheets for the Protagonist and Antagonist. Keep them together with the previous worksheets. Finish this before moving on to the next assignment.

### **Assignment 2:**

Pick four scenarios from **worksheet five** and write at least one paragraph per scenario for both protagonist and antagonist. Dig deep and delve into their innermost feelings, fears and secrets.

## Worksheet Five – Fleshing out the Character

Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_

- Protagonist
- Antagonist

Describe how the character would feel during these events. Please note that some are gender specific. Try to be descriptive and explain how the character ended up in the situation or how they'd feel if these things happened.

A beloved pet dies.

A child has been abused.

He/she has been raped.

He/she does drugs and ends up hurting someone.

He/she has lost their job.

He/she ran over a child while driving.

He/she is robbed.

Does politics anger or amuse the character?

Someone breaks the law in front of your character, would they report the crime?