

Character Development

You've created your character – you know their goals, you know what they look like, you even know all their quirks and bad habits. Now what? How do they intertwine with the plot of your story? How do they *grow*?

This handout is aimed at providing a brief overview of character development and how it works within the overarching narrative of your story. By the end of your work, **your character should have changed in a distinct and noticeable way and grown** from the journey they were on. This is called a **character arc**. Character development, then, is the small changes undergone over the course of the story as a result of their experiences and their actions. This relates back to the overarching work: the novel is created from your characters interacting with events over time. In a sense, character and plot are inseparable.

What allows characters to grow is **conflict**. It can be both *internal* (their main problematic as a character) or *external* (the main problematic of the story). How do these two different conflicts mirror or complete each other? How do these conflicts affect the character's pursuit of their goal? How will they be *changed*?

To note that if the audience does not have a sense of your character, they will be unable to appreciate the significance of the events your characters are living and how it affects them. That is why introducing your character and working out their personalities, their looks, and their inner thinking, is important.

Show, don't tell: with that being said, let the reader discover the character through the story as well. Do not force them to view the character as you do. Show your reader and let them *see* them. Trust them to form a mental image of the character. If you need to *tell* them who the character is for them to understand their essence, you have failed.

How to develop characters? Which events develop them?

- **Test your character.** Put them in situations which will bring out their complexities, their flaws, their strengths.
- **Make them fail and work for their successes.** Conflict and struggle are necessary for your characters to develop. The more distinct their victories are from their defeats, the more impactful both sets of events will be.
- **Learning from other characters.** Secondary characters can be 'foils' to show traits different from the protagonist's, highlighting their main characteristics. Characters can develop through their interactions with one another just as we learn from others every day.

The key is not to make your characters completely hopeless or perfect. As your characters develop, make sure that the changes make sense within the context you have established and are *realistic and believable*.

Here is an example of character arc that blends both plot rhythm and character development:

- **Starting point:** introduce the status quo and your character at the start of the story.
- **Character's life changes forever:** this is caused by an incident or major life change.
- **Character makes a major change:** here, you have turning points and new problems.
- **Character faces a setback:** this is the breaking point; all hope seems lost.
- **Character struggles but comes out on top:** climax of the story, character wins (or not)!
- **Character is changed forever.**

Many people write by process of discovery. As Stephen King advises, "Put interesting characters in difficult situations and write to find out what happens." Below, I have included a short list of prompts that prompt you to describe your character from a focal point such as their nickname, their physicality, or their safe space – including these in your narrative can help a reader discover your character through specific aspects of their lives.

- Does your character have a nickname? How did they earn it? Does it refer to their appearance? Their attitude? How do they feel about it?
- Choose one event from your character's past and elaborate on that. For example, your hero has a back injury from an accident suffered in the navy. Do they move differently now? Do people treat them differently? What are the psychological repercussions of the accident?
- Choose one of your main character's personality traits and list the ways that it's expressed.
- What space has your character created for themselves? This can be offstage: a bedroom, an expensive car with all the right gadgets, the perfectly-stocked kitchen, a private office. Describe your character in that space.
- Write their inner monologue, preferably in the first person (to really get you into their head). Show their thoughts, but also show the world around them and how they interact with that world. Try to develop an inner monologue that is at odds with the world around them or with the way they appear to be.
- Think on one of the events that will happen in your story. How much will they change? What inspires their change? Do they change for the better? Do they change for the worse? Do they change the world and/or people around them?
- An ex-love walks into a coffee shop but hasn't yet noticed them. Should they greet them? What do they say to someone whose heart they broke five years ago?
- In fewer than 250 words, describe how a defining moment in your character's life made them a better/worse person.
- Write about how your character's best friend's dead body shows up in front of their house. What will they do to find out who's responsible?