CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT EXERCISES

by Bill Cameron

At its core, character development is not about likeability, or relatability, or sympathy. It's about empathy. As writers we must understand not only a character's traits, interests, needs and desires, but what they value and how they see themselves—as well as how others see them. Internal conflict and contradiction is often foundational to who people are.

Method Writing

Writing a good character is a little bit like being a method actor. You have to get inside the head of your character. You have to *live* them. Not only that, you have to have a touch of multiple personality disorder too. Before your characters can interact on the page, whether in concert or at cross purposes, they need to interact in your imagination.

Your characters will be strongest if you can write from inside them.

Balancing Act

Character isn't just who people are on the inside, it's influenced or even driven by the beliefs and assumptions of others.

Fundamental Questions of Character

There are several questions you will look to answer as you develop characters. These won't apply in every case, but in general your characters will become richer and more interesting the more questions you answer.

- What do they want?*
- What do they need?*
  **Wants* and *needs* may be in conflict.
- What are they hiding?
- What will they do to protect their secrets?
- How will they react if their secrets get out?

The Sum of the Parts

When I'm building a character, I look to explore five major areas. Obviously these are very broad and can overlap, but provide a foundation for character development. As a fun way to focus on each area, I will sometimes put together a LEGO person, adding a piece as I work out associated areas.

- Emotional and Intellectual Intelligence (Head)
- Gut Reactions or Intuition (Torso)
- Strengths and Weaknesses (physical and skill) (Legs)
- Presentation (appearance, fashion, physical traits) (Hair/Hat)
- Choices and Beliefs (Object)

In the exercises below, you can explore all these areas or choose a specific area you'd like to understand better.

THE EXERCISES

Each of these exercises is designed to help you get at the heart of your characters from different angles. Some are very high level, some get down into the weeds. In each of the exercises, your goal is to explore who your characters are: discover their values, needs, and desires; identify internal contradictions and hidden weaknesses; and zero in on where these things can lead to conflict.

The Merger

This exercise was originally suggested by Maya Angelou. I find it to be a great way to create a character when I'm not sure where to start. The goal is to build a composite character out of real life people. Start by listing the traits of three or four people you know. They can be friends, family, public figures—it's up to you. Then take the most interesting traits of each character and merge them into a new character. Pair up complementary and contradictory traits, strengths with weaknesses, values with behaviors. Finish by writing a profile of your new character.

Six-Word Biography

This is a variation on the Six-Word Story made famous by Ernest Hemingway. In his original story, "For sale: baby shoes. Never worn," he masterfully suggested backstory, emotional stakes, and conflict.

In the Six-Word Biography, you'll distill the essence of your character down to their foundation. The point of the exercise is not to reveal the full breadth of who they are, but to focus on the core that drives them.

Example: *Died young, somehow got through it.*

Character Interviews

These are a particular kind of exercise in which you use free writing techniques to get your characters to tell you who they are. The process is about pouring out ideas quickly, as in traditional free writing, but with a focus on the individual you want to know more about. When you interview your characters, you're trying to trip them up and get them to reveal things about themselves—especially those things they might want to keep hidden or may not consciously recognize about themselves.

Character Interview: Self

The self-interview is a free writing technique structured as a dialog between you and your character. Possible approaches:

- Job interview
- Publicist getting to know a new client
- Investigative reporter
- Detective interviewing a suspect, or a district attorney questioning the hostile witness on the witness stand
- Therapist, counselor, or life coach
- Parent or spouse trying to get to the bottom of things

The goal is to force your character to talk about themselves, to reveal their secrets. You may badger, threaten, cajole, flatter, bribe. Be obsequious, or matter-of-fact. Act as though you don't believe anything they say, etc. As a rule, go from the general to the specific.

General questions to get things started

- What do you want?
- What do you need?
- What are you afraid of?
- Who is afraid of you?
- Why do you deserve it?
- What's keeping you from getting it?
- What are your weaknesses?
- In what ways you strong?

Interviewers come to their subjects prepared; they have an idea of what they need to know and sometimes they even have the answers already. In this latter case, the interview isn't about getting the answers but about seeing how the subject provides—or avoids—them.

Focus on relevance. The danger of this exercise is you can find yourself down a rabbit hole of details which don't expand your understanding of your character in the *context of the story you're trying to tell*. The more significant the character is in your story, the more you'll want to know about them. Temper the effort you put into the exercise against the importance of the character.

Variations

- Protagonist interviews antagonist
- Interview a significant other of the character, such as a spouse, sibling, parent, or close friend

Character Interview: Partner

Much like the self-interview, the partner interview is about discovering the unexpected about your character, but this time you're going to take advantage of the perspective of a partner. Working with a writing partner, interact as if you are your character. The process can be casual and conversational, or you may ask you questions as if you're a journalist or interviewer, with your partner then doing the same for you.

Possible approaches:

- Talk without interruption, and consolidate what you remember later. The discussion has time and freedom, but at the risk you'll forget details.
- Record the interview and transcribe later.
- Take notes as you go, either writing as you talk or taking short breaks to get details down.

Experiment with different styles until you find something which works for you.

Antagonist's Report

Write about your character from the point of view of their adversary. And don't forget: this goes both ways; your protagonist is your antagonist's adversary.

- What does their antagonist hate about them?
- What does their antagonist fear about them?
- What does their antagonist respect about them?
- What does their antagonist like about them, begrudgingly or otherwise?
- What does their antagonist think they know about them that is it actually true?
- What does their antagonist understand about them that they don't know about themselves?

Adversaries are often the quickest to recognize ambivalence, contradiction, or hypocrisy. Our enemies may see us more clearly than we see ourselves.

The Unexpected Skill

It's a given you'll focus on the skills your characters need to fulfill their role in the story., whether they're a spy, a rodeo rider, a violin player, a student, and so forth. (Whether they've mastered these skills is a separate matter.)

For example, James Bond needs to be able to shoot, fight, drive fast, and adjust his tie whilst falling from airplane. Whoever you're writing about, you'll develop a clear picture of what they can do (or need to learn) in order to address the story conflicts they'll face. But there's more to character. What does Bond do when he's not defusing nuclear missiles? Perhaps he knits, or does découpage.

Ask yourself what *your* character does when they're not fighting aliens, studying for finals, romancing that cowboy, or amateur sleuthing? Their unexpected skills or interests will not only reveal added character depths but may provide a surprise strategy for tackling a thorny plot problem.

The Childhood Room

Describe your character's bedroom from when they were very young. What kind of furniture does it have, what colors are the walls, what does it smell like? Did they have to share their room? Did they get to decide what was in it? What did they like about it, what did they hate about it? Do they feel nostalgic about it? Do they miss that room? If they could bring one thing forward from that place, what would it be, and why? An understanding of how your character feels about where they come from can give you insight into how they see themselves in the present.

First Times

First experiences often loom large in the lives of young people, and depending on the nature of the event may loom large for a lifetime.

Describe some firsts for you character:

- First kiss
- First conscious defiance of an authority figure
- First time drinking
- First date
- First physical fight
- First break-up

How old were they when these events happened? Did they instigate the act, or did someone else. Is it a happy memory, or a source of pain? Why? Trying describing the event as an objective observer, then as told by the character. How do the narratives differ?

Environmental Autobiography

This is a variation on the Childhood Room exercise, but covers more territory both physically and in terms of your character's interior landscape.

Even if you're writing in the third person, or you're working on a secondary character in a first-person narration, I recommend writing the environmental background story from the first person. You're exploring how a character feels about where they come from and where they are, and exploring their relationship to their personal landscape.

This technique can work for minor characters too, though your probably won't go into the level of detail necessary for a major character.

GENERAL CHARACTER TIPS

"Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person."
—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Method Writing

Writing a good character is a little bit like being a method actor. To really understand them, don't merely describe them, but *live* them. Before your characters can interact on the page, whether in concert or at cross purposes, let them interact in your imagination.

Your characters will be strongest if you can write from inside their life experience rather than simply *about* their life experience.

Misery Begets Plot

Embrace your inner sadist. It is your duty as a writer to unleash misery on your characters.

Weakness Is Your Plaything

Exploit weakness. Strong characters can be very entertaining, and successful strong characters have existed in books and movies for decades. But weakness is the place where you create crisis.

Exploit blind spots. People often hate their own weaknesses, and in that self-hate hubris and crisis can be found.

Turn strength into weakness, weakness into strength. Just about everyone has a strength, and usually they know what it is. When they rely on it inordinately, opportunities for conflict abound.

Loss is Character-Building

Many stories are built on the foundation of a major loss. But even a small loss can drive plot. Lost keys, a misplaced cell phone. A loss which is insignificant to most people can change the life of your characters.

A Twitter Thread on Choice

by Jeffe Kennedy

twitter.com/jeffekennedy **12 Apr 2018**

› I'd like to talk a bit about characterization and character motivation. I bring this up because I see newish writers making this error. We talk a lot about character goals – what do they *want* – but not the nitty gritty of how to show this in a story. 1/9

› This can be difficult, particularly for novelists because of the time it takes to write a novel. It's easy for the writer to forget from the time you begin to the time you end to pick up all of those threads. This is where revision is critical! 2/9

› For example, if the heroine wants a secret file, and agrees to meet the hero to obtain said secret file, when she arrives – and the file folder is lying on the table – she's not going to think about how good he looks *first.* 3/9

› She can't "just now notice" the folder a few paragraphs down, if it's what she WANTS MORE THAN ANYTHING. Sometimes in the process of writing, we set the scene – nice restaurant; wow; guy is handsome in a suit – then we get to plot. 4/9

› It's a natural writing habit. AND this is one reason we need to revise! On the revision pass, we note the character will see the much-desired file folder before anything. 5/9

› This is how our attention works: we see what we're keyed up to look for. (Biologists call this a 'search image.') 6/9

› It's okay for a character's motivation to change over the course of the book – this is part of the arc – but whatever is most important to them at any given time needs to be what they see/hear/smell/seek out before anything else. 7/9

› In fact, you can show change in a character by gradually changing what they put their attention on. But make sure this is a deliberate choice. 8/9

› Experienced writers do this so subtly the reader doesn't always notice. But I can guarantee it's something they check on revision passes. Making a revision pass only for character motivation improves the story exponentially 9/9

Paging Doctor Freud

One of the most powerful tools a writer has is his or her power of observation. That alone creates an obligation to shamelessly eavesdrop and people-watch, and then analyze what you learn.

- Mine human inconsistencies.
- Exploit idiosyncrasies.

Creepy Uncle Frank Is More Interesting Than Sweet Grandma Bea

Like certain relatives, you can love your characters, but you don't have to like them.

Sympathetic is not the same thing as likable. Likable isn't even necessary as long as your characters are compelling. Great fiction is rich with fascinating jerks.

Don't Go Back into the House!

People make bad decisions, but they should make them for good reasons, at least from their perspective. Typical drivers of decision-making:

- Desperation
- Certainty
- Incomplete information
- Greed
- Fear
- Love

Red alert! Plot points which hinge on someone making a stupid decision for no reason are risky.

Aphrodite Emerges From the Shell

No one exists in a void, and who we are is shaped as much by where we come from as anything. Character context can serve as a plot driver.

- Social class
- In the moment circumstances
- Upbringing
- Landscape

Technique for character exploration: the environmental autobiography (see above).

Like Your Characters, but Not Too Much

We spend so much time with our characters they begin to seem like old friends or family members. This poses a danger to us as storytellers though. Most of us don't want bad things to happen to the people we love. Even if we're consciously posing problems for our characters, our desire for things to work out for them may lead to go easy on them. Great for them, but this makes for a less interesting for our readers.

Every now and then, do a check. As yourself what you most want for your characters. Now, take it away from them. That should liven things up.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Point-of-View

Point-of-view both restricts story options and creates story opportunities. Who tells the tale and how they tell it shapes the story being told. Point-of-view also shapes how characters are revealed and understood by the reader.

A critical consideration when choosing point-of-view is how it will affect characterization.

First Person

- The person telling the story has limited knowledge. This kind of narrator may also withhold information or mislead the reader. The way they tell the story not only shapes the story arc but also how your readers see them as people.

Third Person

- Distance allows for degrees of omniscience; readers may see things characters don't. This lets the reader understand your characters in ways they can't themselves.

Multiple POV

- Maximum information for the reader is a tool for generating suspense, and a way to reveal the diverse ways different characters see and understand each other.

Writing is a solitary activity. Writing for publication is a collaborative one.

Once you get a contract—or if you choose to publish independently—lots of people may be involved in the publication of your book: production editor, copy editor, marketing people, graphic designers, and more. But even before you're ready to publish, it's good to involve others.

Actively seek out early readers and be open to constructive criticism. You don't have to agree with every critique, but if multiple readers say the same thing, they might just be on to something. Be open to changing or cutting even those bits you love the most. If it doesn't advance the story, it needs to go. Fortunately, there are no laws against character abandonment in fiction.

Give yourself permission to suck.

Whenever I read about a writer who produces "clean first drafts" I think, *Good for you. Now shut up*. Which is not to say that I think producing clean first drafts is bad. If you have that skill, wonderful. But too many prospective writers give up because they feel their first efforts are not good enough. If you can't write clean first drafts, *at least write something*. And once you have that draft, you can put the next principle into action:

Revisions are when you get to get to move the darts onto the bull's-eye while no one is looking.

Relish your chance to make your work better. Don't be afraid of multiple drafts. There's no correct number of revisions.

The key is to do the amount of work the story needs.

Trust your instincts.

Part of growing as a writer is learning to recognize and accept your weaknesses, and then overcome them. You must also learn to recognize your strengths and feel appropriate pride in them. You're going to spend a lot of time struggling and wracked with doubt. So when you nail something, celebrate it. Don't be afraid to say, "I know this is good."

SUGGESTED READING

Masterful Characterization in Action

- *Sadie* by Courtney Summers
- *Code Name Verity* by Elizabeth E. Wein
- *Mr. Samuel's Penny* by Treva Hall Melvin
- *Lock and Mori* by Heather Petty

On Writing and Story Telling

- Stephen King: *On Writing*
- Lawrence Block, *Spider, Spin Me a Web*
- Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*
- Chuck Wendig, *Damn Fine Story*
- Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

"You don't understand an antagonist until you understand why he's a protagonist in his own version of the world."
— John Rogers

FICTION BY BILL CAMERON

(also writing as W.H. Cameron)

Novels

- *Crossroad*, Crooked Lane Books, December 2019 (as W.H. Cameron)

- *Property of the State*, Poisoned Pen Press, 2016
- *County Line*, Tyrus Books, 2011
- *Day One*, Tyrus Books, 2010
- *Chasing Smoke*, Bleak House Books, 2008
- *Lost Dog*, Midnight Ink, 2007