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PRESENTS

# CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT



**FROM FUNDAMENTALS  
TO FLESH & BONE**

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# Introduction to Character Development

Do fictional characters fascinate you? Are you surprised when the people in stories feel more real than real life?

Unless you're writing abstract and absurdist fiction, your stories have characters. These characters have names, motives, flaws, conflicts, and unique backgrounds – and it's up to you to flesh those elements out!

Great characters are often what brings the story to its full potential, but since people are inherently complex, great character development is hard to write. This ebook is designed to jumpstart your character writing.



## Sketching the Basics

Maybe you've got a name and a role for your character, but you're struggling to go from there. Let's start with the basics! There are three questions you want to ask every character that you create:

### Character Development Question 1: What do you most want?

Every human being wants something. This is largely what it means to be human. To want, desire, crave, need, cherish, chase, hunger for. Whatever your character is chasing—put it right up front, in the opening scene and make it large.

Your character should be desperate to attain this one thing. The more desperate your character is, the more the reader will engage with the story. The reader will only care as much as the character cares. The character must be willing to give up anything, go through anything to attain what he or she so desperately wants.



## Character Development Question 2: What do you most fear?

We all have fears. We don't like to talk about them, but they're there, under the surface, causing us to act in ways we don't understand, driving our thoughts, words, and deeds. When we give our characters these same fears, readers are able to connect with them as if they were sitting in the same room.

## Character Development Question 3: What will cause the reader to remember you after your story is long over?

We all have traits, habits, idiosyncrasies, ideas, behavior patterns that stand out from the crowd. The trait should be visual, a bit over-the-top, and hold a dramatic meaning of some kind. It should characterize —aid the reader in truly beginning to understand and know your character.



## Personality Questions to Ask Each of Your Characters

You've sketched the basics, and now you could probably have a conversation with the character you're writing. Great job! Now, let's get into the nitty gritty. Good characters have depth, experience growth, have flaws—they're real people. Asking yourself a defined set of character development questions is one way to develop characters who jump off the page with realistic and compelling personalities.

Ask your character...

### Who are you?

Think of the “who” of your character as the firm foundation with which you'll bring your character to life. This “who” might take the form of one or two honest sentences that really tap the essence of the character. Starting with a strong “who” can help you add depth to your character throughout your story.



## What are your strongest motivations?

What, fundamentally, drives your character? To be accepted by his or her peers? To create something new and beautiful? To protect his or her loved ones from a dangerous world? To find perspective on mortality? What are the core, underlying drives that shape this character and the actions he or she takes?

## What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

What world does your character hope to see? What would fulfillment look like for your character? What is your character doing to reach toward these hopes—or do they seem too far out of reach?

## What are your biggest fears and/or regrets?

Your character certainly has a future he or she doesn't want to end up in. What is it, and why? What are the darkest secrets and the biggest failures from your character's past? What haunts him or her?

## What are your greatest strengths?

What comes easily to this character? What makes this character strong, and why?



## What are your greatest weaknesses?

Every good character has weaknesses. What puts your character out of place, out of his or her comfort zone, vulnerable? Why?

## What are you like socially?

How does your character view other people? Is your character very social and extroverted, or a little more on the quiet, shy, introverted side? Thinking about how your character acts in social situations can help you “beef” up your character and add depth.

## What is your role in the story?

Consider your character’s role in the development of the story. Why does your character exist in your story? Is the character a protagonist, antagonist, or secondary character? How does your character change the story? And how is the character changed by the story—what is his or her development arc?



## What is your connection to the overall story line?

This is the important link between your character and your overall story line. What specific impact will your character have on the overall progression of your story?

## What sort of dynamic exists between you and the other characters?

Consider the relationships your character will have with other main or supporting characters. How do they interact? How do their personalities and motivations bounce off one another? How do they come away feeling upon interacting with each other?





## Create Your Own Character Questionnaire

Of course, the questions you ask your characters differ depending on their unique set of traits and circumstances. The previous 10 questions are a great base to start from, but once you've got the core details sketched out, it's time to investigate the specifics of your characters. It's time to craft a character questionnaire!

Creating your very own character questionnaire can be extremely useful in the writing process and enhance your understanding of your characters, prompting you to develop new, unique elements of their personalities. It's a great tool for figuring out what makes your characters tick, and it can help align your storyline and plot with your character's overall personality.

As you work to create your own questionnaire for characters, you can search for existing examples. The ten questions above are one example, and here are a few others:



- [160+ Character Development Questions](#)
- [Creating a Memorable Character Worksheet](#)
- [Character Profile Template](#)
- [“How to Create a Powerful Character Arc” by Jerry Jenkins](#)

Lastly, as you look for questions to ask your character, it may be useful to take a hint from the “self-help” section of your bookstore. The same sort of self-inquiry that is important in our own lives can be applied to the development of your characters.



## From Plan to Paper

Can you sit down with your character in a coffee shop and have a real life conversation? Can you watch them move, follow their facial expressions, predict what clothes they'll wear and what they want for dinner? If the answer is yes, then you're ready to write stellar characters into a stellar work of fiction.

These next 5 questions are designed to give your characters the kiss of life. Put theory to practice by implementing these questions in your story writing, and you have the makings of a great story in your hands.

### What makes a character relatable?

Vulnerability. Psychic wounds. Imperfections. Foibles. Unresolved trauma. Addictions. Transparency. Ability to laugh at oneself. A degree of self-abasement and humility. Courage to face fears. Desire to sacrifice for others.



These traits should be worked into your plot, giving your characters every possible moment to both stumble and shine. Each character must, in one way, be completely lovable and in another, be capable of falling hard and letting all of the other characters down. The reader needs to be able to see herself in your characters.

### What is the secret to creating characters who have breath?

Extending the hand of friendship. We must make friends with our characters. I don't mean that we necessarily have to want to hang out with them. But we must at some point embrace both their strengths and weaknesses, their light and dark sides, their sanity and psychoses.

In order to live close to them for however long it takes you to write a story, you must not only be able to tolerate your characters, but you must be willing to live next door to them and invite them into your home—yes, even, on occasion, the “bad guys.” If you don't feel safe, go visit them in prison, but in any case, be brave enough to befriend your characters.



Like it or not, our characters are extensions of us. We certainly don't like everything our children do, but we don't disown them because of bad behavior.

### What is the biggest challenge writers have when it comes to creating characters?

The inability to understand the depths of our nature as human beings. It's never a lack of writing ability. It's a lack of knowledge and experience in understanding the essence of our human nature and then knowing how that nature is expressed in relationship with other human beings. In order to create characters that breathe and move and talk, we have to get outside and away from our computers at times.

My volunteer work in jails and prisons for the last 26 years has by far been the one element that has most informed my work as a writer. Because the men aren't afraid to tell me who they are. Their honesty and vulnerability has caused me to grow in my storytelling skills more than any population I've ever before engaged with. For you, it doesn't have to be prisoners, but find the population of humans that speaks to you, and get out there and hang out.



## What is the most difficult kind of character to create?

I would have to say that after many years of coaching writers, the characters that writers struggle with the most are the shadow characters.

The dark ones. The unconscious ones. The ones that resist our pressure to conform to what we want them to do. This is because as writers, we don't like to look at our own dark sides, and so we find it challenging to create characters who think, talk, and act in ways we hope we never would. We don't know these characters who show up in our stories, and we don't want to.

We use them as a device to create conflict for our heroes, but devices aren't three-dimensional. They're plastic and one dimensional, and the reader can sense that something is off. As much as possible, we must understand and be at least somewhat able to be present to the kind of darkness we create for our dark characters.



## What's the formula for developing authentic characters?

I don't advocate using formulas, but there are a few tried and true elements of creating authentic characters.

### Character interviews

Interview all of your characters before you start writing your story. Ask as many questions as you possibly can, and not ones that they can answer with a "yes" or "no." You might want to put them all on stage at the same time, and see if they play off of each other when answering your questions.

Don't ask predictable questions—take your characters off guard. Doing this, you can discover some fun and imaginative facts about your characters. They'll surprise you.



## Become your characters

Be brave enough to become your characters. One of the assignments in my Starting to Write class is to write from a perspective that is opposite from the one you hold. Take risks and be willing to listen to and be open to characters who want to talk but whom are very different than you are.

Just for fun, write a brief scene in each character's first-person viewpoint and see if your story takes off. You'll discover voices coming out from inside yourself you didn't even know were there.

## Using the enneagram

I recommend using two personality studies; the Enneagram and Archetypes. You can look both of them up on line and do your own study. Once you know your character's Enneagram number and major archetypes, you know your character—how she's going to act, move, and talk much of the time.





## Don't judge

Refuse to judge your characters. The major key to creating authentic characters is to hold an open space for each of them, letting them be themselves without fear that you're going to kill them off because they suddenly reveal something you don't like. You're the writer, but the story isn't about you.

At least, it shouldn't be. If you want to write your story, write a memoir. (There's a place, of course, for using fiction to write about yourself, but the truth is, the characters don't usually come off as authentic because the writer keeps hiding from the truth about himself for fear of a reader somewhere discovering that it's really his life story. My experience.)

And that's how to create characters that breathe!

If you can pull off all of the above, you'll have created characters that the reader will engage with, connect to, and follow from the first to the last page of your story.



# Meet the Authors

## Meghan Christie

Meghan Christie is a freelance writer and English educator who divides her time between Toronto and London. Find her on LinkedIn [here](#).

## Gloria Kempton

Gloria Kempton is the author of seven nonfiction self-help books and two young adult novels, as well as hundreds of short stories, essays, personal experiences, personality profiles, how-to's, and feature articles for a number of national magazines including Writer's Digest. For three years she wrote a column for single parents in a parenting magazine. Her book, *Dialogue*, was published by Writer's Digest Books in 2004 and is still selling well.

She is the former Managing Editor of *Parents of Teenagers* magazine and was a freelance book editor for nine major publishers including Harper Collins. She is a former contributing editor for *Writer's Digest* magazine. She continues to critique and edit both fiction and nonfiction for individuals, as well as coaching writers one-on-one on any aspect of fiction, nonfiction, marketing, or the writing life.



# Meet the Authors

## Gloria Kempton cont'd

Gloria teaches at writers conferences and has served on several writer's conference boards and program committees, including the Pacific Northwest Writer's Conference, and chaired their midwinter conference for two years.

She has most recently published a correspondence course, *The Outlaw's Journey; A Mythological Approach to Storytelling for Writers Behind Bars*, which she is now taking into correctional institutions around the country. She's currently writing a book based on the material in this course. Read more about Gloria on her [website](#).



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