

Character building

Understanding how characters drive stories can help any writer create a compelling narrative

If you're a writer, you may have experienced that feeling of your characters coming to life on the page, making decisions you weren't expecting. Or perhaps your previously well-behaved plot seems to be running away from you? Whether you're penning a novel, a short story, a play, a memoir or even if you're just starting out on your creative writing journey and not quite sure how it's going to develop, it's a scenario most authors face at some point.

The vast majority of stories have characters or protagonists, and most stories have a plot or structure of some kind. Different writers follow different processes, and there's no right or wrong way to draft, but it can be helpful to keep some basic understanding of character arcs and plotting in mind.

Understanding character and plot

Some stories move forward according to the choices the characters make, and these are said to be character driven. Others focus more on events and actions, with characters responding to external circumstances, and are described as being plot driven. Successful stories often find a balance, with characters influenced by their own internal conflicts and emotional growth as they respond to events and challenges.

American author Hayley Milliman is director of community at ProWritingAid, an online toolkit of resources for creative writers. She says: 'Quite often, newer writers think a lot about the plot, and as they develop their work it becomes clear that it's the character transformation their work needs to make the story truly satisfying.'

Fellow author and creative writing tutor Anna Wilson, from Cornwall, UK, points out that a story's protagonists are the thing the audience connects with and the reason why the events of the story matter. 'I believe that all plot is character, and when writers are struggling it's because they don't know their main characters well enough, or their secondary characters are two-dimensional,' she says. Genre can also play a

part. Thrillers and crime novels are often described as being plot driven, although there is still character development involved, whereas in romance writing the characters are key.

Creating compelling characters

A brilliant exercise to reflect on the importance of characters in stories is to think about the ones that stand out for you in your favourite books, films or shows. Whether it's Elizabeth Bennet, Sherlock Holmes, Black Beauty, James Bond or Bridget Jones, there will be some fictional characters that you know so well, you can almost believe you've met them.

Great characters have strong voices, compelling personalities, even catchphrases, and are fully developed and three-dimensional. Some writers find it useful to do character studies, or even 'interview' their characters to find out more about them. You may not need to include your character's full backstory in your writing, but it can be helpful when bringing them to life if you can imagine their physical appearance, family relationships, hobbies, friendships, their sense of humour, what worries them and what their dreams are.

If you're stuck, Anna suggests getting quite specific. 'You need to go beyond blue eyes and brown hair,' she says. 'Think about psychological depth, personal experiences and backstory. To write a really good character you have to be interested in what makes them tick.' Hayley adds: 'Anything you can do to get into the heads of your characters is useful. You might even do a draft in first person, to really get the feel for their point of view, then change it to third person in later edits.'

Taking them on a journey

A character arc is the transformation or inner journey that your characters go through during the course of your story. 'The key to moving any story along is knowing what the conflict is between what your character wants and what they need,' says Anna. Again, think about some of your favourite novels or movies, and



the changes the characters undergo. How are they different at the end from the beginning? What have they learned? How have they changed or grown?

Hayley points out that romantic fiction offers great examples of character arcs. ‘These stories are driven by transformation. The two romantic leads both have something that keeps them apart and needs to be resolved before they can get together, such as family problems, trust issues or being haunted by past relationships,’ she says.

Where great plotting comes in

The plot is the sequence of events that make up a story. It’s the things that happen to move the narrative forward, as your characters are put into challenging situations and forced to make difficult choices. In fact, Anna suggests that one way to overcome writer’s block is to present your characters with more events or challenges to overcome and see how they behave. ‘That’s how you test them,’ she says. ‘Are they going to be brave enough to step up to the plate?’

Many stories follow a structure where the characters are introduced and the scene set, then there is some sort of inciting incident, throwing your characters into their first challenging situation and upsetting the status quo. Anna describes this as ‘starting with a main character who doesn’t know what’s about to happen to them.’ This is followed by progressive complications or escalations, where the stakes are increasingly raised.

As your narrative moves towards a climactic incident, your characters could face dilemmas or find themselves in a seemingly impossible situation. After a climax that gives them a real opportunity for growth and change, you can move your story towards its resolution, establishing a ‘new normal’. Anna explains: ‘At the end, the main characters are irreversibly changed by what’s happened to them. They will never be the same again.’

If you’ve ever listened to a friend or relative telling a long, rambling story, where they go off on tangents and struggle

to get to the point, you can begin to understand why story structure matters in writing. Anna explains: ‘The reason we have structure is to impose order on the chaos, so that someone who isn’t in your brain can understand what’s happening.’

Plotters vs pantsers

You may have heard writers describe themselves as ‘plotters’ or ‘pantsers’, and there is much debate in writing circles about which method works best – with many favouring a combination of the two. A plotter likes to create an outline of their story first, planning the main scenes and points of conflict, such as their inciting incident, conflict and resolution. They may also do detailed character studies or research before beginning their story. Meanwhile a pantsers – so called because they prefer to ‘fly by the seat of their pants’ – prefers to discover their story and learn about their characters as they are writing, losing themselves in their work, with little pre-planning. Hayley describes herself as a plotter, saying: ‘I find it useful to think about why I’m starting and ending my story at those specific points.’

If you listen to or read interviews with your favourite authors, you will soon realise that all writers have very individual ways of working, and it’s fine to go with whatever works for you. But Anna suggests reminding yourself of the basics: ‘Whose story is this? What do they want and need? What is standing in their way? And why should the reader care?’

Rules are also made to be broken, and many brilliant works of fiction do just that. Hayley concludes: ‘Writing is your art, and it’s about the story that you want to tell.’

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Find ProWritingAid at prowritingaid.com or @prowritingaid on Instagram. Find Anna Wilson on Instagram @acwilsonwriter or on Substack at acwilsonwriter.substack.com ‘Keep it in the Family’

TAKE YOUR CHARACTER ON A JOURNEY

Try asking yourself these questions to deepen your understanding of your characters and what might happen to them

- What does my character want? What are their ambitions or desires?
- What does my character need that they might not realise?
- How does my character think other people see them?
- What are their greatest fears and flaws?
- What sort of situations make my character feel uncomfortable?
- What challenges would my character find difficult?
- What is the lie that my character believes about themselves or the world?
- What would their worst-case scenario be?
- What secret is my character keeping from the world?
- What could happen to them to make them learn a valuable lesson?



