

SLIDE 1: CHARACTERS

This time, we'll talk about main, secondary, side and walk-on characters, and talk a bit about opening scenes.

- Next time, we'll focus on villains and the first confrontation scene.

Main character:

- The person the narrative centers around.
- The person making the decisions which drive the story forward.
- The person who experiences the main events in the story firsthand, and is forever changed by those events.
- The person the reader experiences those events through.

Secondary character:

- Gets almost as much screen time as the main character, and is equally vital to the plot
- Has his own story arc
- Facilitates change in the main character, either by helping or hindering
- Makes independent decisions that directly affect the main character's circumstances
- Has a fully developed personality and unique character traits.
- Often a mentor character, or a character who dies tragically (as an inciting incident)
- Examples: Watson, Han Solo, Spock, Lois Lane, Gandalf

Side (or Tertiary) character:

- Has a name and a background
- Has some dialogue
- Often comic relief
- Often not vital to the plot, but valuable because they provide interest and color
- Example: Jimmy Olsen, Jabba the Hut

Walk-on characters:

- One line of dialogue, or none at all
- Few appearances that last only for a few moments
- A first name, title or no name, and only a few personality traits
- Characteristics (such as voice, appearance & attitude) are based on the setting and the needs of the plot
 - A checkout girl might be surly and tired, a waitress might be a sassy woman of a certain age

SLIDE 2: ARCHETYPES VS. METAPHOR FAMILY

Archetypes: Character types that consistently appear in particular genres

- Fantasy:
 - The gray-bearded wizard, the thief with a heart of gold, the princess who wields a sword, the evil Grand Vizier
- Mystery:
 - The Sherlockian detective, the old lady who solves mysteries for fun, the high-handed, bossy heiress, the playboy, the small-town Sheriff.

- Romance:
 - The supportive best friend, the shopaholic, the mousy girl who just needs a makeover, the bridesmaid, the matchmaker who falls in love.

Metaphor Family: A developed and consistent persona, which encompasses strengths, weaknesses, behavior patterns, speech patterns and thought patterns.

- Sleeping Beauty can't strap on a sword or start cussing like a sailor.
 - If you write your Sleeping Beauty to be a sword-fighting, cussing princess, she can't also enjoy embroidery and dancing.
- Bruce Banner/The Incredible Hulk: Two metaphor families in one character.

SLIDE 3: HEAD/HEART/GUT

Head/Heart/Gut:

- A trio of character foils that often show up in fiction, and that make the plot feel balanced.
 - Head: the character who is primarily driven by intellect
 - Heart: the character who acts based on what his conscience demands, and is concerned for the welfare of others
 - Gut: the character who is primarily driven by instincts ("gut feeling") and the emotions of the moment
- Represents three aspects of our interior decision-making
- Allows for argument in dialogue
- Creates conflict in a scene

Example 1:

Head: Spock

Heart: Bones

Gut: Kirk

Example 2:

Head: Sherlock

Heart: Mrs. Hudson

Gut: Watson

Example 3:

Head: Luthor

Heart: Superman

Gut: Lois

SLIDE 4: THE FOUR ASPECTS OF BELIEVABILITY

A full life

- Job
- Family
- Interests & hobbies
- Injuries & Illnesses
- Scars
- Trauma

A fully developed world

- Setting sheet details
- Areas of activity the hero often encounters:
 - Neighborhood
 - Workplace
 - Traffic
 - Parks
 - Grocery stores

Behavior that readers can identify with (that seems “real”)

- Bad habits
- Pet peeves
- Embarrassing reactions
- Bad decisions and little white lies
- Behaviors associated with age
- Behaviors associated with lines, traffic and waiting rooms
- Coping with boredom
- Dealing with authority
- Dealing with irritating things
- Dealing with dislikeable people

A clearly defined personality

- Unique conversation style
- Unique backstory
- Flaws
- Secrets
- Assertiveness
- Beliefs/values
- Personal tastes

SLIDE 5: EVERY CHARACTERISTIC MUST HAVE A PURPOSE

- The character should be a good fit for the genre and setting
 - Genre conventions:
 - Detective should be a wisecracking loner
 - Princess should be trained in etiquette, dancing, music and art
 - Cowboy should know how to shoot, ride well and rope cattle
- Characteristics come from heredity and disaster. That's why you need to know the character's backstory, even if your reader doesn't.
 - The disaster that shaped the character is the disaster he must overcome in the climax
 - The character must make a difficult choice in order to overcome the disaster
 - Depression and other mental illnesses alienate readers
- The character's personality and background influence the skills that he chooses to develop
 - Someone who almost drowned as a child might either be terrified of water, or swim competitively
 - Someone who lost a parent to cancer would be especially terrified if cancer developed in a spouse
- Characteristics must match the metaphor family
 - A viking shouldn't be a pacifist
 - A teenage boy should burst into speech, sometimes interrupting. He should take a long-suffering attitude with his parents. He should spend a long time getting his hair just right in the morning, and be finicky about his shoes. He should be worried about his future, and reluctant to discuss it, especially with his mom.
- Foreshadow how characteristics will become important to the climax
 - A character with terrible stage fright will perform a soliloquy in a school play at the story's climax.
 - The seeds:
 - His mother was a famous actress
 - He works on set crew
 - He has a crush on a girl in the cast

Example: Character's family died in a fire

Character:

- Has nightmares about fire
- Plays with matches
- Has trouble forming connections with others
- Dreams of becoming a firefighter
- Has a burn scar on his hand where he grabbed a door handle

The climax: he saves someone he hates from a fire

The seed: he repeatedly warns the person he hates about getting caught smoking behind the school

SLIDE 6: GRAB THE READER'S ATTENTION

Image: Mendenhall Glacier (Juneau)

Make him take a stand on something

- Where can it go wrong?
 - Have I allowed this character to express his uniqueness without overdoing it?
 - Have I made him annoying?
 - Is there anything in the character's attitude that might turn off readers, and what can I do to make him more likeable?
 - Is this aspect of the character so dominant that it's steering the plot in the wrong direction?

Make him decisive and proactive: The character should take action when he doesn't get what he wants.

- Where can it go wrong?
 - Did I focus too much on what the character wants, and not stop to think about WHY he wants it?
 - Did I remember that the character's desire should be the thing that gets him in trouble?
 - Am I protecting this character from the consequences of his actions?
 - Am I allowing the reader to see the negative aspects of the character's personality? Is my character too perfect?

Give him an intriguing secret

- Where can it go wrong?
 - Is the character's secret compelling enough to remain interesting for the entire story?
 - Does the character have irritating traits that detract too much from the intriguing one?
 - Has the story itself hinted at the mystery through scenes, or have I simply told the reader about it?
 - Have I introduced the mystery in a flashback?
 - Have I learned about the mystery from someone other than the POV character (overheard dialogue, for example)?

Make him funny

- Where can it go wrong?
 - Does the hero use humor to apologize for his existence?
 - Does the hero use humor against others (as a weapon)?
 - Does the hero make light of situations that nobody would find funny?
 - Does the hero come off as insensitive?
 - Is the hero funny to anybody other than you?

NOTE: The more dislikeable a character is at the beginning of the story, the more vital it is to demonstrate the character's particularly admirable trait as soon as possible.

SLIDE 7: CHOOSE ONE HERO

- Who is the hero in the story depicted on the slide?
- If you start your story with a battle scene and describe all of the things happening in the image, do you have a story?
- If you pick three people in the image and discuss things happening to all three of them—from the POVs of all three—do you have a story?
 - Let's try it:
 - Miriam shied away from the grasping hands of her attacker, all the things that might happen to her rushing through her mind. She'd heard the stories of the infidels, what they did to young women when they sacked cities. Rowena pressed her forehead to her sister's breast and sobbed, hearing the shouts of the men all around her, the screams of the horses and their pounding hooves. She could feel an arm around her, a hand pressed against her belly, pulling her away from her family. Abigail stared up in shock at the man standing on her gown, pinning her in place even as more men descended on their little family. She could smell them, the sweat of their unclothed bodies. She wanted to shut her eyes, but couldn't. If she lived through this, everything would be burned into her memory, haunt her waking hours and torment her as she slept.

Why it doesn't work:

- POV problem. Who is our narrator? Who is the story about?
- We are wired to pick a hero and follow the story of the change that happens to that hero.

SLIDE 8: THE MAIN CHARACTER MUST HAVE A DEEP WOUND OR SIGNIFICANT WEAKNESS

- Must be a personal struggle
- Must be in addition to the external struggle
- Must be something that the character can't easily overcome
- The character must have a coping mechanism.
- The character should try to hide it or justify the coping mechanism
- Causes the character to make foolish choices
- The foolish choices must drive the story

Example:

A health care worker, Miriam, travels to Texas hill country to help with flooding. Miriam recently broke up with her boyfriend. While helping with rescue efforts, wearing herself out mentally, physically and emotionally, she meets Jake, a flood survivor who won't tell her much about himself, but sweeps her off her feet. Others in the group warn her that there's something off about Jake, but she continues to see him, despite the phone calls at odd hours that he goes into another room to answer, and the times he goes out of his way to avoid someone, but won't tell her who or why.

- External struggle:

- Inner struggle:
- Is the inner struggle something that isn't easily overcome?
- Coping mechanism:
- Does the character try to justify holding on to the coping mechanism?
- Does the coping mechanism drive the character to make foolish choices?
- Do the character's foolish choices drive the story?

Memoir & Literary:

- The main character is you, so you have to show your own weaknesses.
- You must pick a number one weakness and tie it to a particular period in your life.
- Your story should include a main protagonist who exploits that weakness or worsens it.
- Your story is about the lesson you learned as a result of dealing with this particular weakness.
- You can take a bit longer to get started with the conflict, because memoir is also about letting people get to know you as a person, which means getting to know your world.

SLIDE 9: DESIRES ARE ROOTED IN VALUES

If you don't know what motivates your character, ask yourself what the character values most

- What your character compliments tells you what they value and what they want
- Internal change happens when a character's values change

Example 1:

- Reggie is a salesman who earns top dollars in commissions, has a hot girlfriend and drives a nice car. His dream is to retire a rich man in the bahamas.
 - What does Reggie value?
- Inciting incident: Reggie's brother dies in a car wreck, along with his wife. Only their ten year old son survives. The son has cerebral palsy.
 - How would Reggie's values have to change in order for this story to have a satisfying ending?

Example 2:

- Paula is the queen of her college. She's beautiful, well-off, has a circle of friends who say they admire her, and is the center of attention wherever she goes.
 - What does Paula value?

- Inciting incident: Paula's roommate, Anna, is shy, introverted and uninterested in makeup, fashion and socializing. The two of them don't like each other. But when Paula drinks too much and gets in an accident, losing the use of her legs, it's Anna who finds her. All Paula's friends abandon her, and now the only one who even acknowledges her existence is Anna—who still doesn't like her.
 - How would Paula's values have to change in order for this story to have a satisfying ending?

NOTE: Memoir is the story of how a person's values changed based on the hard lessons life taught them.

SLIDE 10: THE MAIN CHARACTER SHOULD HAVE A SHORTSIGHTED GOAL

When the story starts, your character should:

- Already want something
- Be actively working to attain it
- Be taking risks to attain it
- Lying to himself about his chances of attaining it
- Lying to himself about the benefits and drawbacks
- Damaging relationships with the people he cares about and/or damaging himself
- Building walls between himself and others who might help him
- Ignoring feelings of alienation and loneliness

Example:

Arnie pushed the door open and sauntered into the board room, pleased to see the shareholders already seated and waiting. He'd put effort into this presentation, and he had a good feeling about it. His idea was going to make the company millions, and with something this fresh, this revolutionary, he was bound to catch the CEO's eye. From there, Arnie was one carefully managed project away from a corner office and a regular seat at this table. There was just one thing he was a bit uneasy about. He'd told Margie he'd meet her for lunch at their usual place, and this meeting was bound to run late. Well, she'd understand. And if she didn't, he could always ask Janet in payroll to the country club dinner this weekend.

It was money that meant something in this world. Without it, you were nothing. With it, you were the guy everybody wanted to be. Arnie had learned that lesson early and well.

- Does the character already want something?
- Is the character actively working to attain that thing?
- Is he lying to himself about the benefits and drawbacks?
- Is he lying to himself about his chances?
- Is he damaging himself or relationships with others?
- Is he building walls and ignoring feelings of isolation?

SLIDE 11: OPENING SCENES

(Intro slide only)

12. BELIEVE, CARE AND INVEST

This is the magic formula for creating good heroes, and for creating opening scenes that hook the reader.

Believe:

- A hero with at least one stellar quality that the reader can admire.
- An opening scene that showcases that quality effectively
 - Save the cat premise based on the idea that a hero saving a kitten is inherently likeable

Care:

- The character's situation must pull the reader's heart strings.
- There must be no hint of self-pity.
- Hero must be active and resourceful

Invest:

"Irony is the source of all meaning" -Matt Bird, The Secrets of Story

How deep can you drive the knife?

Example 1:

A man doesn't speak to his father for ten years. The man goes to the senior home to visit his father and discovers that his father has died.

Example 2:

A man doesn't speak to his father for ten years. The man goes to the senior home, and discovers his father has died because he tried to leave the center to find his son and got hit by a taxi.

Example 3:

A man doesn't speak to his father for ten years, goes to the senior home and discovers his father has died, because the father tried to leave the center and was hit by the taxi **the son was riding in.**

As soon as possible, make your reader want to root for your main character:

- Something happens to your hero that is genuinely unfair.
 - Just as Luke decides to stay on his home planet and help with the farm, his aunt and uncle are killed by the empire.
- Your hero sacrifices something for someone else
 - Just as Katniss Everdeen's little sister is chosen for the Hunger Games, Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place.

- Your hero takes a stand when nobody else will, and suffers for it throughout the story
 - Just as Leia is defying Darth Vader, he blows up her home planet of Alderaan

SLIDE 13: THE CONFLICT MUST START ASAP

- Your main character is the first person the reader should meet
 - Your character should be physically active when the story opens
 - The main character's wound or weakness should be clear by page three
 - The main character's initial goal should be apparent by page two
- The character decides and acts. That begins the story.

Is this making a decision and acting?

Example 1: Young dragon is stolen from his cave and traded to a dragonriding academy, where he's expected to allow humans to ride him.

Example 2: Addict gets high in a bathroom stall, the police come and haul him away in a squad car.

Example 3: Woman is kidnapped by a police detective gone bad, and forced to ask for help in a video ransom demand

Example 4: A boy is in the middle of escaping from a pirate ship when the ship hits a rock, and he is thrown overboard, washing ashore on a deserted island.

Example 5: At their mother's funeral, a sister accuses her brother of stealing the family inheritance

SLIDE 14: CHARACTERS MUST ALWAYS ACT AT THE TOP OF THEIR INTELLIGENCE

- Once their bad choices put them in a terrible situation, they should make intelligent moves to try to escape.
- Your character should not be forced to do something that is against their nature and not in keeping with their personality.
- Always be ready to change your plot.

Example:

To impress his young sister, who likes to ice skate, a young student at a magical wizard college attempts a spell to create an ice rink at the top of his tower. The spell misfires. The ice melts and water starts streaming down the sides and staircases of the tower. The young wizard conjures a surfboard and surfs down the staircase. The tower collapses. The young wizard walks away, hoping nobody will notice.

Why doesn't it work?

- There is no reason to put an ice rink at the top of a wizard's tower.
 - Find a different way to please the sister that is more logical.
- The surfboard is the least logical thing the character could do. The character could:
 - Try the ice spell again.
 - Break a hole in the side of the tower.
 - Call for help.
- There is no reason why a wizard would know how to surf.
 - Presumably, spells are complicated. The wizard would not have a reason to spend time learning to conjure something as useless as a surfboard.
- The young wizard walks away, hoping nobody will notice.
 - Why doesn't he try to hide what he has done?
 - Why doesn't he ask for help?
 - This is a college. Why does the story assume that nobody has noticed a catastrophe this large?