

# CREATING CAPTIVATING CHARACTERS

## Introduction

Every one of us has experienced closing a book and feeling like you've said "goodbye" to some dear friends. As a writer, one wonders, "What is the secret to writing these characters – ones we root for...or rail against...the hero we can't stand to leave behind when we reach the words, "The End,"... the bratty girl we just can't stand, period?"

Here are some tips and writing exercises designed to get you started creating your own captivating characters.

## What do you know?

In order for your characters to seem real to your readers, it is important that they are real to *you*. Sometimes, you are gifted with a fully formed character, sprung to life from the depths of your imagination, begging you to let him out to roam all around the imaginary world he is about to uncover for you during his exploits. More often than not, however, you are starting with a single plot point, or even a simple story idea, and you need to do a little hard work to discover who the characters are in your story.

## What is in a name?

A good place to start learning about a character is to be thoughtful and intentional when selecting your characters' names. First, consider the heritage of your main character, and the cultural relevance of the name you are selecting. A girl from Poland will likely not have the same first name as a girl from Syria, for example, and, most assuredly, the surname would be different in each case.

Another strategy is to name your character after an attribute you wish them to be known for, even if it is a name that is rarely heard in real life. For example, if you have a strong male character, you may choose to name him, Kalmin, which is of Scandinavian origin and means "strong".

Of course, there are other, more commonly heard names that mean "strong" in the English language, such as Everett, Liam, and Aaron. It is sometimes telling about a character's background if you give your character a more obscure name. For example, Veda and Sofia both mean "wisdom," but one must admit, there is a different mindset at work when a Mother chooses the more uncommon of these two names for her child.

## Exercise

Ask yourself, "What does this character's name say about the environment he or she grew up in? What can we deduce about his or her parents and familial origin? Take some time to jot down your thoughts about this. Or, write the story of how the character's Mother decided on that particular name. Don't be afraid to carry on for quite a few hundred words as you complete this exercise.

As our childhood has a huge impact on our lifelong decision-making, you will be amazed at how this gives you understanding into the motivations of your character.

## “What are you gonna do about it?”

One way to get to know more about a person is to watch their reaction to any given stimuli. For example, imagine my husband and I were walking through a creepy, cobweb filled house on a dark and stormy night, and a loud crashing sound suddenly filled the air. I’d likely jump out of my skin, while my husband would continue to saunter along, un-phased, perhaps looking back over his shoulder at me after a few steps, wondering what my problem is.

That should tell you there are a number of differences between myself and my husband. I have a wild imagination, while he is quite pragmatic. I have a mercurial temperament, while he is mild-mannered.

Here is probably my most unorthodox tip for writing captivating characters: throw your character into a scenario and see what they do. Really. Just, start writing.

At the risk of sounding “hokey,” I recommend you say to your character, “I’ve gotten you into this predicament, now show me who you are by how you handle it.” Of course, one should be careful not to actually ask this question out loud, unless you have a rather understanding family who has become used to your writing shenanigans.

For added fun, write a scene with two or more of your characters in it. Force them to interact with one another. Fight scenes are especially good for digging up “meat” about your characters (especially between romantic interests).

### **Exercise**

Place your character into one of the following scenarios, then write the scene. Try not to spend too much time describing the environment. Instead, make this scene full of action. Even simple actions count, such as moving around the room, or expressions and reactions to events. Each of these is a “peek” into the “mind” of your character.

- Witnessing a car accident.
- Observing someone shoplifting.
- Riding a rollercoaster.
- Shopping for a new car.
- First day at a new school or new job.
- Cleaning out an attic.
- Discovering a friend request from an “old flame.”
- An argument with another one of your characters (about any topic).
- Any other situation you can think of, or a prompt from a generator.

### **Extra Credit**

Before you start writing the scene, set a timer for 25 minutes, and see how many words you can write in that time frame. Having the added pressure of a deadline will force you to write the first thing that comes to your mind, instead of spending a lot of time trying to “decide.” It will feel like your characters are acting independently!

### **Conclusion**

How did it go? Do you feel like you know your characters a bit more? Do you think you have a better idea how they would react to that plot twist you have coming for them in your third act? Let us know how these tips and exercises worked for you! Send an email to:

[connect@christianindiewriters.net](mailto:connect@christianindiewriters.net), or look us up on Facebook!