

The Ultimate Character Checklist



One of the most important ways to snag those readers is to ensure your story delivers a vicarious experience—one they can get emotionally wrapped up in because they've connected with your characters and care about what happens to them.

In short, a compelling plot or amazing true story is only half the battle. Your story needs a character who is worthy to shoulder the burdens of that story. Even if that character is you (say, in a memoir), readers need the most compelling you possible.

What makes a character compelling to readers? You want a character who's fully fleshed out, multidimensional with a backstory that adds weight and meaning to who they are today, how they see the world, what matters to them, and why they make the choices they do. They are real—except created on paper with ink (or pixels and electrons!) rather than flesh and blood. Plenty of writers insist that their characters feel so real that they dictate their own stories.

Let's make sure your characters are so real and fleshed out that whatever they dictate is compelling!

The Character Bible

A useful tool to use in getting to know your characters is to complete brief character sketches, or, in some cases, creating longer versions known as character bibles. You've probably seen or heard of them: lists of questions you answer to figure out who, exactly,

your characters are and what makes them tick (and the list helps you keep track of things so your character stays consistent).

For character sketches/bibles, you can find numerous lists of questions online and in writing how-to books. We've compiled some of the best questions and approaches below for starting your character bible. You don't have to know everything before you write the actual book, but having at least a decent character sketch in place can help you stay focused on what's most important in your story.

Interview Your Characters

One popular way of learning about your characters is to conduct a mock interview with them. You can interview your characters at any point during the writing process. See how your character feels about a situation in the story. Ask about key childhood memories. You may uncover priceless nuggets, including things that don't end up in the book but will form the character and layer the story, making it that much more believable and real.

Below are a few sample questions and some basic information to help you flesh out your characters. Because not every character will "respond" to an author as if they're real, the author will need to deliberately mold a character. The answers to these questions should reveal something about who your characters are and why.

- What's their basic background?
- What do they fear most?
- What's the biggest thing they wish for?
- What important items do they carry in their pocket, keep in their bedroom, or hide in their purse (and why)?
- What is their social class?
- What is their ethnicity?
- What is their country of origin?
- What is their current residence?

- Hometown (if different from current residence): Where someone grows up will have an impact on how they view the world. Someone raised in Tokyo will view the world very differently from someone raised in New Orleans.
- Age: The way a five-year-old describes something or relates to an event will vary dramatically from how a teenager, a forty-something, a retiree, etc., would tell a story. Notice sentence length and structure, vocabulary, and so on. Also, be aware of *who* your character is interacting with. A teen will tell their best friend about a car accident in very different terms from how they'd explain it to the police or to their parents.
- Gender: While you should be careful about stereotypes, some generalities tend to hold true, and if you flip those cultural expectations on their heads, your readers will take notice—so if you do, make sure it's intentional, and that intention is clear to the reader. For example, if a young bride is describing the walls of her dressing room, she's far more likely to use a term like *coral*, *salmon*, or *peach* than *orange*. Part of the reason is that women have more cones in their eyes and therefore can see more shades than men. For a young bride, the word *orange* would probably carry negative connotations and imply a crass-looking, too-bright room painted in the shade of a traffic cone rather than a pretty pastel. On the other hand, a woman totally uninterested in sports might not be aware of the basics of football (four downs, ten yards to a first down, yada yada), and if asked how the game is going, would simply give the score. Meanwhile, her sports-fanatic husband might go off on a five-minute spiel about the various plays and calls and his opinion on them. Of course, flipping gender norms can be great. Go ahead and have a female car mechanic or astronaut, a male nurse or dental hygienist. Just be sure the reader knows you're deliberately bending gender expectations or the character will feel off. And don't have a young bride call the walls orange unless she finds the color garish.
- Language: This one goes hand in hand with hometown and educational level. Where a person grows up affects how they speak, including quirks in pronunciation ("wash" or "warsh"), terminology (sneakers/tennis shoes, soda/pop, traffic circle/roundabout), and more. For that matter, if your character has been away from their hometown for a long time and returns, their language patterns may shift back into the register they used back then, even speaking with an accent they haven't used in a decade without even realizing it.
- Education: Educational background can show differences within a family as well: the sibling who went on to become a professor of literature at Yale will likely speak and look at the world differently from a sibling who dropped out of high school and works the family's cattle farm.

- Favorite and least-favorite things: For contemporary works, these could be favorite pop songs, books, TV shows, and films. For historical works set in the 1800s, it could be family heirlooms, gowns or hats, classical music, and, again, books. Know the era of your story and what kinds of things were popular then. If you're writing a contemporary work, be sure to use broad enough examples that you aren't dating the story.
- Animals they love and/or can't stand.
- Colors: Which make them happy? Does a certain color make them feel nauseated? Be sure to make any colors, decorations, or other details accurate to the place and/or time period of your story.
- What smells remind them of home? Of a terrible experience? Of a happy experience?
- Passions: What does your character care about that most people might not? Does he collect antique guns and hand-sew accurate Civil War costumes for reenactments? Does she attend Comic Con events and collect photos with her favorite celebrities? Maybe a character lives frugally so he can travel solo to exotic places. Another can't live without classical music—and destresses by playing her flute. Is your character a doctor who has picked up oil painting on the side? A mail carrier who pours every extra penny and hour into making his yard look like something out of a magazine? Giving your characters something they personally find exciting and fascinating makes them feel deeper, rounder, and more like real, interesting people.
- Career: Stay-at-home mom? Work-from-home parent? Rocket scientist? Grocery-store bagger? Telephone repairman? Artist? Publicly recognized and appreciated or not appreciated? Love or hate the work?
- Biggest contribution: Where does your subject spend most of his or her energy? Children, community, school, politics, career, etc.? What accolades or awards has your character received? Any newspaper articles, television, or quiet comments from other characters? What really *is* their greatest contribution versus what they *think* their greatest contribution is? They may not be the same thing.

Once you have a list of answers, you can ask your characters *why* they have those preferences, or *why* those things matter or have influenced them.

Each item helps to create multi-layered, dynamic characters because these preferences tell us something about what the character has gone through—what has turned them into who they are.

If you're still stumped, here are a few other ideas:

- Pick up a game or book that has ice-breaker questions made to get to know other people. Instead of asking them of your friends, pose them to your characters. (You can also try psychological profiling questions, like the Briggs-Meyer tests.)
- Imagine your characters in a situation together—not one that's in the story, but maybe something like that horrible team-building retreat you had to do for work—and watch them interact. Throw in a conflict and see what they say, who does what, and take note of the ensuing fireworks.
- Characters should be like real people, so don't hesitate to base yours on someone you know. Okay, maybe hesitate a little. Don't set yourself up for a libel charge. But here's the thing: you likely know some interesting people, people unlike you, whose life experiences and ways of dealing with things differ from yours.
- Base them on people you don't know. For instance, if you've been inventing backstories, speech patterns, and everything else, but your characters still feel a little wooden, look around. Be observant. Listen to people. Watch how they change, or don't change, and what it takes for that to happen. It helps to draw upon the traits of people we know or have met—but disguise them, of course. Sometimes all you need is a gesture, an unusual turn of phrase, a hairstyle, or an interesting laugh to make your character come alive. Go to a mall (or a location with the type of people you're trying to write) and people-watch. Take notes and use what you see and hear!
- You can also add depth and meaning to your character with their names. This may seem obvious, but writers overlook the careful naming of their characters at their peril. Consciously or not, readers have associations with different kinds of names. If you deviate from preconceived notions, have good reasons for doing so. You have a lot of latitude here, and as the writer, you can utilize your characters' names as another tool to layer meaning and carry along the story, even on a subconscious level, for your readers.

J. K. Rowling was masterful at creating character names that added meaning to who the character was. Names can give us a clue to religious, cultural, or geographical heritage; they can reveal a possible age given a specific culture (not many babies are currently being named Fred in America); and they can also be symbolic. For instance, in the *Harry Potter* books, Sirius Black is named after

the Sirius constellation, which is Canis Major, or the Greater Dog; the Sirius of Rowling's world can turn himself into a great, black dog. Even Lord Voldemort's name has significance—*vol de mort* translates as "theft of death" in French, and his agenda is to cheat death, to live forever. When in doubt, interview your character about what their name should be and why.

Backstory Enriches Your Characters

Back story is a fantastic way to flesh out a character. But before we dive into how to develop that, we have one important caveat: don't make the mistake of using only backstory to define your characters. Characters need to face here-and-now conflicts, and readers need to see how they handle those conflicts as the key markers of who your character is. It's tempting to tell a ton of backstory. After all, if you've done your job, it's all fascinating information. But keep your focus on the story itself, the one with all the action you set out to tell in the first place. Use the back story to support the current plot.

We can't emphasize this enough: backstory should *inform and enrich* your characters and their *current* story—not replace them.

However, backstory and history created the character—gave birth to them, so to speak. This is true of real people, too: while we are more than the sum of our pasts, our pasts have helped shape who we are. The same should also be true of your characters. As you write your story, you'll find places where you can thread in bits and pieces of critical, or at least fascinating, backstory. Add backstory to those places, as long as it's giving insight to who your character is *now* and helping to move your plot forward. You want your readers to believe that all your characters really exist and aren't just on the page.

Here's a list of important questions about a character's history you can ask as you're writing their backstory:

- Upbringing: How did their family life affect them? Were they raised by both parents, a single parent, grandparents? Were their parents or guardians strict or lax? Attentive or neglectful?
- Love and family: How do their family members treat one another? What level of love and respect exists among family members?

- Daddy issues—everyone has daddy issues. And mom issues, for that matter. What unique issues from a parent does your character have and how do they affect his/her present? If your character doesn't have any, know why. This is a case of a time when the reader may not need to know, but the author should, and that knowledge will form the story.
- Biggest life choice: What was the most life-changing decision they ever made? A few possibilities: marrying outside the family's religion, moving to a foreign country, serving in the military, refusing to take a bribe, going to college across the country, switching majors, getting pregnant as a teen. This is a really, *really* juicy question! Be prepared for some beautiful and meaty answers!
- Past careers or jobs—What did they learn from them? What do they regret? What don't they regret? Did they learn to handle work situations differently after making a mistake on the job? Do they regret turning down a job because it required a pay cut or a relocation? Do they not regret dramatically quitting in the face of repression and calling their boss out on the abuse?
- Any experiences with war, economic depression, drought, natural disaster, or any other major event or important circumstance?
- Past pains, past losses, past wounds (physical or psychological). Greatest triumphs too. How did those things shape your character into who he/she is now? Is it still affecting their choices and outlook in positive or negative ways?

Looks: What Matters and Doesn't

Go beyond appearance. That's not to say what characters look like isn't important, but unless looks move the story along, keep descriptions sparse. Stumbling through tedious physical descriptions of a character can stall the story. In the beloved-by-girls series *The Babysitters Club* by Ann M. Martin, each book contains a full chapter where the narrator describes, yet again, the physical appearance and personality traits of each member of the club. That chapter is probably the most skimmed over or flat-out skipped by readers.

Experiment with different looks. Attractive main characters tend to be cliché and boring after a while. One way to make them stand out and seem more human is to give them flaws—and here, we're talking physical ones. Add a zit (or four), give them split ends, make their jeans too tight. Show your female characters struggling with putting on their

makeup perfectly—a little skewing of the eyeliner or the lipstick outside the lip line. These little physical flaws (we'll cover personality flaws below) will make your character more true-to-life, endearing, and memorable.

Little flaws can also create a unique picture for the reader, but physical description doesn't need to be too detailed, so just hint at it. You, the writer, may have a clear mental picture of what each of your characters looks like, but does the reader need to have the same picture? If so, use good writing to work in those details instead of pulling us out of the story. You want readers to form a mental picture rather than read endless paragraphs of physical characteristics they are expected to remember.

Here's a sample from a character list for a mystery work in progress, "Sugar Pie and Moonbeams":

Patricia "Pansy" Ireland

- The mom everyone wishes they'd had (you know the type)
- Remembers everyone's birthday and anniversary
- Bakes cookies and cakes for all occasions
- Organizes church suppers and fundraisers
- Creates the tastiest potluck meals
- Knits, crochets, sews, and sells all her crafts at the annual Moonbeam Craft Fair
- A widow who lost her game warden husband, Duke, to mysterious circumstances years ago
- Adopted a son shortly after her husband's body was pulled from a local river
- Employed as Moonbeam's town clerk
- Also owns and operates the Moonbeam B & B, so her personal appearance and her inn are impeccable
- Greatest claim to fame is that her great grandmother was a survivor of the sinking of the *Titanic*

A detailed physical description of Pansy is unnecessary since we can muster up one based on this. Of course, this exact description will not appear *per se*, but it will be interjected throughout the book.

Here's an example of working a physical characteristic into the story:

When Samantha and Alyssa got in line at the cafeteria, the guy in front of them glanced back, did a double-take, and turned to Sam.

“Hey, do you have blue eyes?”

“Yep,” she said.

“Did you know that the combination of red hair and blue eyes is the rarest in the world?”

Samantha nodded as she grabbed two trays from a cart, one for herself and one for Alyssa. “I’ve heard that. In fact, I have two sisters with red hair but brown eyes. I’m the special one.”

“Cool,” he said, and turned to face the front of the line again.

Alyssa took the tray Samantha offered and sidled up to her, whispering, “That was weird.”

“What was?” Samantha asked, genuinely confused.

“Do you know him?” With her tray, Alyssa gestured at the guy.

“Never seen him before in my life.”

“Huh,” Alyssa said. “So strangers really do randomly talk to gingers.”

“Told ya.” Samantha shrugged with a laugh. “Happens all the time.”

Give Your Characters a Few Flaws and a Bit of Personality

Now that you have established what your character’s physical appearance is, you need to determine what his or her inner flaws are. Which ones will hold them back on their journey? Which ones will interfere with their decision-making? Which ones will be endearing, and which will make your reader want to reach through the pages and shake some sense into them? Also, what kind of person is your character—fun to be around,

outgoing, a bit rambunctious? Or are they quiet, introverted, and is it difficult to break their shell?

Here are a few questions to get you looking at your characters' mental traits:

- Humor: Does the person you're writing about have a raucous sense of humor? Dry sense of humor? "Appropriate" sense of humor? Inappropriate? Nonexistent?
- Spirituality: Religion colors most aspects of many people's lives. Is your character a person of faith? Why or why not? Agnostic versus actively atheist? If they're not religious, are their parents? What if the parents aren't religious, but your character is? Are they of different faiths? What is the spiritual culture of where they live? Do they value faith over science, vice versa, or value them equally and see how each is simply one way of knowing/understanding?
- Integrity—or lack thereof: this is a critical part of being human, and most of us are still learning. Where your characters are on the spectrum—what they do when no one is watching—will say a lot about them.
- Reputation: What's your character's reputation like? Do they actively groom their reputation and work to defend it? Or do they not particularly care what others think?
- Temptations: Do they overcome temptation? Why or why not?
- Emotional psyche: Choose one way to describe your character in a few words. Think "hard, stubborn, or foolish" or "soft as a marshmallow." Your characters should have loves, hates, fears, joys, sadnesses, jealousies, resilience, resignation, and a myriad of other emotions, just as a real person does. Which of these emotions rule your characters' personalities? Why?
- Work ethic: Many people are incredibly hardworking. Others like to live off the labor of others. But don't fall into those simple stereotypes and clichés. There are a hundred ways to describe work ethic (one can also work very hard in one way to avoid working in another—or work very hard at being a criminal!). Make it unique. What kind of work will they do, not do, and why? Will they do certain work for fame and fortune? Or is their goal simply to provide for themselves and their families? Is it because they believe in one cause but not another? Will they write twelve hours a day but not take out the trash or dust the apartment? When writing *Walden* (about Walden Pond), Thoreau was willing to move to the woods,

build a shelter, and live off the land, but he wouldn't have a rock or trinket in the place because he didn't want to have to dust it! He also didn't do his own cooking or cleaning or gathering firewood. He had a hired woman come do all of that.

- Treatment of children, animals, and the less fortunate: Here is a truly remarkable way to show a character's personality to the reader. If you show a man backhanding a paperboy or kicking a stray dog, we'll immediately dislike him. But show the same man buying a paper from the boy—paying extra—or stopping to pet the dog and feed him a bit of the granola bar in his pocket, and we'll think he's a great person we want to get to know.
- Does he or she have nervous habits like nail biting, face scrunching, bouncing a foot while sitting?
- Do they have silly but endearing habits like a Diet Coke addiction, a shoe collection, or keeping the blinds closed all day? Do they spend more time online than with other humans? Why?
- Do they have any unusual aversions? For example: "Ever since the green-bean incident of '93, Joe has avoided neighborhood potlucks," or "Ever since the drinking straw scraped against the ice in the glass, she avoids putting ice in her drinks."
- Does your character have vivid dreams? Recurring nightmares? What do they daydream about? (See DreamMoods.com for great ideas on making symbolic dreams.)
- What are they sentimental about? Do they keep so many trinkets and knickknacks it's hard to see their mantel? Why can't they bear to get rid of the doilies on their toilet despite hating the style and the dust each collects? Why do they still have that napkin with their crush's phone number from five years ago?

All these traits and quirks help to build a well-rounded character who has an interesting backstory. And this is where we issue the warning that no matter how fascinating the backstory is, it's not what your current narrative is about—so don't get caught up in backstory!

Character Relationships

Your characters are in this story together, so you should build them in relation to one another, not as isolated individuals. Taking this approach makes for a richer storyline and facilitates conflict in the story. When you understand from the beginning how your characters are connected, you'll know how any action—or mistake—taken by one of them has a domino effect of implications. You see the ripples that follow for everyone else before you even write the stone being thrown in the water.

Consider the hierarchies of relationships: where we are in social standing with those around us changes how we behave and what we think. (These can be associated with work or career, education, class, income—old money versus new money—religious authorities, friendships, children and spouses, neighbors, even the HOA! History and place dramatically shift all of these again.) Our standing in those hierarchies changes depending on who we are with and where we are at any given time. We rise or fall in social position, and so do the related feelings, actions, and dialogue we have relevant to our confidence, authority, humility, feelings of love or resentment, and what kind of power the other person/organization holds over us, etc.

Character Arcs

No matter the obstacle, be it another person, nature, setting, or illness, characters will come to a point where their paths and goals change and force them to confront those obstacles. This will happen throughout the story, but the first time is typically the inciting incident. How your character overcomes each obstacle to achieve their goals—and how they *themselves* change during the process—is the most compelling part of characterization. This change, this transformation from who they were at the beginning of the book to the end, is known as the character arc.

Readers want to see a character grow through the external pressures put on them. (Remember that the reader is on a vicarious journey with your characters.) With very few exceptions, characters cannot come out of the fire and still be the *exact* same person. Otherwise what purpose did their journey serve?

- Some characters will transform internally (identity, sense of purpose, view of life).

- Some characters' external status may change (they are forced to relocate or have been promoted or demoted at their job; or they have gone from being alone to finding their true love).
- Some characters remain similar in both internal and external status, but their actions will have drastically changed the world around them, thus changing their future.
- Some characters face an opportunity to grow and lack the strength, courage, or ability to do so, which ultimately maintains the status quo, but they leave the story having learned a painful life lesson. (The reader may learn from this lost opportunity even if the character doesn't ultimately change his/her behavior.)
- In some tragedies, the character may not recognize their lost opportunity, but the reader sees the vast damage the character has caused to themselves and their world by not seeing the error of their ways.

In all cases, every story will have some kind of transformation that is meaningful to the reader, regardless of how the characters end up. Transformation is the key to any story.

You can determine your characters' aptitudes and strengths for achieving goals by adding some questions to your interview:

- Up until the story opens, what were the three most difficult obstacles you've faced?
- How did you overcome them?
- What is one of your most outrageous, unreachable goals?
- What's on your unrealistic bucket list (meaning items that aren't feasible)?

As with previous interview questions, the answers may not change the way your story plays out, but knowing what your character has achieved in the past and what they hope to achieve in the future gives you a better picture of who they are as your story begins and helps you tell their story more effectively.

For more story-forwarding ideas on a character's transformation—their arc—consider the following checklist:

- What internal qualities will your character have to change to accomplish the key external plot goal? External plot refers to the primary goal of the book, which is usually shared with other characters, like saving the world from the bad guy. For

example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the primary goal is to save Middle-earth from the evil Sauron by means of destroying his ring. In a romance novel, the primary goal overcome the obstacle (distance, insecurity, self-doubt, family or friend disapproval) preventing the lovers from being together. Achieving this goal usually means the characters must change internally—overcoming weaknesses or altering their world views. Sometimes it means acquiring new skills or knowledge. What changes will your characters need to make *internally* to reach the *external* goal?

- What is a guiding metaphor or evolving thematic/philosophical motif that can reveal your character to readers over the course of the book? For instance, in more than one story, you may have seen the symbol of a caged bird. At the end of a story, seeing what the bird does when freed can represent your characters' decisions and ultimate values.
- What important object or desire are they willing to sacrifice? For who/what? How does this change over the course of the story? What values do they emerge with, and how are they personally changed because of the experience?

The answers to these questions should add up to information that will tell you what makes your character transform, or, depending on the kind of story you want to tell, they may simply learn a painful lesson even though they don't transform (a lesson that still allows the reader to transform if your story speaks to their struggles).

Now, Get Back to Writing!

Now that you've explored your characters' thoughts, motivations, backgrounds, descriptions, and habits, and determined their overall character arcs, you're ready to write those into your story.

Keep your character lists close by as you're working so that you can remind yourself of details that will help transfer the character onto the written page. Since writing a book can take months, and sometimes years, it's easy to forget some of the details you've spent a lot of time putting together.

Also keep in mind that when you're writing your first draft, you might be surprised that one of your characters strays a bit from your plan for them. Keep writing, keep

developing that character—you never know when inspirational will strike. As long as you keep at it, you'll end up creating a character who your readers can laugh and cry with, sigh and fall in love with, hate and raise a fist to, and want to introduce to every reader they know.

As long as readers respond powerfully to your story—be it that they feel woken up, moved, enlightened, stronger, or nourished, and, at the least, more determined to embrace their own lives—you've done your job!

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