

LESSON #1

CHARACTERIZATION

"I just saw this amazing movie! You've got to see it!"

Have you ever said these words or something like them before? Maybe it wasn't a movie you raved about, but a book or a television show. Chances are the response you received was a question:

"What's it about?"

"Well," you may have replied, "It's about this boy (or girl)..."

Every story begins with one thing in common: *a hero (or heroine)* who somehow captures our imagination and makes us want to root for him all the way to very last second. The hero, or **protagonist**, is the main character of the story, the person we care most about and to whom most events in the story happen.

There may be other characters as well, including a villain (the **antagonist**), friends and family members, and various supporting characters. Like threads woven together in a tapestry, these characters help form a complex and varied texture to a story. Without characters... well, there would be no story.

Like real people, characters have certain characteristics, or traits, that make them unique and memorable. Unlike real people, however, the author gets to pick and choose which traits the characters will have. You create them from your own imagination while drawing on real-life examples for inspiration.

We will discuss four sets of traits that your characters should have: Physical Traits, Psychological Traits, Personality Traits, and Backstory. By imbuing your characters with realistic traits, they will begin to seem lifelike to you and will be easier to bring to life on the page.

PHYSICAL TRAITS

When you meet someone for the very first time, what is the first thing you notice? His eyes? His hair? The way he smiles? Your first impression is usually based on that person's physical appearance. Likewise, a physical description of the protagonist can be found near the beginning of most stories. The description may be brief, just a word or two, or fill half a page. But by the time we, as readers, are invested in the story we have a pretty good idea what the hero looks like. Physical qualities help us to distinguish one character from another and allow us to form images of them in our minds.

APPEARANCE: The most obvious physical traits include gender (male or female), age, ethnicity (race), hair color or style, and eye color. However, appearance should go beyond the obvious. You should consider other details as well, such as body size (height, weight, build), and immediately visible features such as freckles, birthmarks, glasses, scars, tattoos, etc. For example, a female character with flowing blonde hair, a milky complexion, and a tall, slender torso is going to look entirely different than a female with clipped black hair, bulging muscles and a large tattoo on her bicep. The reader will also make automatic judgments about each character based solely on their appearances.

CLOTHING: You may have heard the saying *clothes make the man*. You can tell a lot about a person by the way he dresses. If you were to see a man wearing a dark suit and tie and carrying a briefcase, you might come to some obvious conclusions about him. He could be a businessman, a lawyer, or a professor. You might assume right off that he is intelligent and educated. But what if this same guy is wearing snakeskin cowboy boots or a pair of worn out Reeboks? Has your perception of him changed? What if he isn't wearing a suit at all, but a pair of denim overalls with a red hanky in the back pocket?

Clothes also reflect the time period in which the character lives. Someone from the middle ages, for example, would never be found wearing Levis, nor would a contemporary boy be caught dead in knickerbockers - unless the story was about time travel.

SPEECH PATTERNS: Another distinguishing factor can be the way a person talks. This might include accents from various parts of the country or the world, speech impediments like a lisp or stuttering, or even their grammar. You would have a far different view of someone if he greeted you with "Howdy" as opposed to "How do you do." We will discuss speech patterns further in the chapter on dialog.

PHYSICAL DISABILITIES: Disabilities can be effective in distinguishing your characters from one another, though I would caution you to use them sparingly. The father in the classic novel *The Secret Garden* had a hump on his back. Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* had a wooden peg leg. Kira in Lois Lowry's *Gathering Blue* has a twisted leg and walks with a limp.

The following excerpts are good examples of physical descriptions. The first is from *Rowan of Rin* by Emily Rodda. The second is from *Leven Thumps and the Gateway to Foo* by Obert Skye:

Example #1:

"Sheba scowled as she hunched her shoulders and stared at Rowan. In the firelight her eyes looked red. Her forehead was bound with a purple rag, and her hair hung like thin gray tails around her face. She smelled of ash and dust, old cloth and bitter herbs...She was prodding the cheeses with her bony fingers, sniffing them one by one..."¹

In this example, we know that Sheba is an old, crotchety woman by her physical appearance. She is hunched over, her hair is long and gray, and she smells of ash, dust, old cloth and bitter herbs. She has bony fingers. The author does not say, "Sheba is old," but we come to that conclusion by the image we form of her in our mind.

Example #2:

"He was fourteen now and so tall that his feet hung off the end of his small bed by a good six inches. His long dark hair was the color of rich mud and on the right side of his head there was a streak of brilliant white hair...He had tried to color the streak, but no matter what he did it remained bright white. Beyond that, he had clear brown eyes, a straight nose, ears that protruded slightly more than

¹ Rowan of Rin, p. 18

*most people's, and a large mouth that made him look a bit like a boy who had not completely grown into himself yet, which is what he was.*²

From this description Leven seems to be a typical teenage boy who is a bit self-conscious about the not-so-typical parts of himself. The fact that he has a streak of white in his hair suggests that there is more to him than meets the eye.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS

While a physical trait is something you can see or hear, such as hair color or a southern accent, psychological traits are internal, or inside the character where no one else can see them. Psychological traits are characteristics of the mind that make your character unique and can affect the way she thinks, acts and feels throughout the course of your story. For our purposes, we will divide psychological traits into three basic categories: *phobias*, *weaknesses*, and *secret problems*.

PHOBIAS: Ask anyone what they fear the most, and it is almost certain you will get an answer. Oh, the answers will vary, but everyone is afraid of *something*. Some people are afraid of the dark. Others hate spiders. Still others are terrified of public speaking, of heights, or of dying. Indiana Jones, the hero in the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is afraid of snakes. In one of the early scenes of that film, he finds a boa constrictor in the seat of his getaway plane. He has just faced tarantulas, collapsing caves, angry natives, and villains with guns, but when he meets the snake he comes unglued. His reaction is funny and it makes him seem *real*. He is not this superman-like hero that has no weakness, no chance at losing. We can relate to him, we like him, and because of that we root for him.

WEAKNESSES: Every character needs a weakness. Otherwise there is no risk of failure. It is that risk that makes a story exciting to read, and the hero's beating the odds that makes us cheer for him in the end. Even Superman has a weakness: Kryptonite, an alien substance that strips him of his powers and makes him like every other human on earth. It is what his archenemy, Lex Luthor, uses against him. Weaknesses can appear in the form of mental disabilities, such as autism (*A/ Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Gholdenko), or a terminal illness, like cancer (*Kira-Kira*, by Cynthia Kadohato). Weaknesses can also be funny. Ella from *Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine was cursed as a child to be obedient. Her weakness is that she must do whatever anyone tells her, often with hysterical

² Leven Thumps and the Gateway to Foo, p. 24

results. A weakness could also be an obsession, age, gender, social status, religion, and on and on. Be creative!

SECRET PROBLEMS: Sometimes the weakness isn't a fear or illness at all, but a problem that torments the protagonist to some degree or another, and may even become her driving motivation in the story. Like fears and weaknesses, most people also have secret problems: discord in marriages or between friends, embarrassing or incriminating events in their past, or a current situation they would like to keep private. Unlike fears and weaknesses, however, these problems do not exist solely inside your character's mind. They are created by her surroundings or relationships. For example, in the Newbery Award winning novel *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech, Sal struggles to come to terms with her mother leaving her. Her feelings of abandonment are the driving force behind the whole plot.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Aside from how a person looks on the outside, the other most distinguishing feature that makes an individual unique is his personality, or how he behaves in public. Think about someone you know fairly well in real life and consider how that person acts towards others. Is she shy or outspoken? Gentle-natured or aggressive? Controlling or passive? Patient or quick-tempered? Tactless or cautious with her words?

Ella in *Ella Enchanted* is as stubborn as they come and uses her curse of being obedient to get back at those who mistreat her. In the book *Anne of Green Gables*, Anne Shirley is talkative and dreamy, but also has a very hot temper, which often gets her into trouble. The Prince in Sid Fleischman's *The Whipping Boy* is a selfish and spoiled brat.

An easy way to discover your character's personality is to pattern him after someone you know. Eventually, as your story develops, your character will develop his own traits as well, but for the time being draw traits from examples in real life.

BACKSTORY

A character's backstory is a completely different sort of thing than those traits a character is given. It contains details about who he is, where he came from, why he is the way he is, and who are the key players in his life. These elements add

depth and realism to the character. There are three basic areas of backstory that should be developed for any character: history, social dynamics, and talents.

HISTORY: First, you must know the character's history. Some authors begin with when and where he was born and under what circumstances. *Oliver Twist* began his life in an orphanage, as did Anne Shirley of *Anne of Green Gables*. They are both orphans whose parents died when they were very young, and were raised in orphanages. Orphans are very popular in fiction because they are the underdog and everyone loves to root for the underdog. (Think Harry Potter, the Baudelaires in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and even Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*.) That doesn't mean you have to make your protagonist an orphan. But you should have some idea of his past.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS: Second, you as the author must know your character's current situation. Where does he live now and with whom? Does he live with his parents? An aunt? In a boarding school? On the street? Does he go to school? Have a job? Who is his family? Who are his friends? Who else does he come in contact with during the story?

In Kate DiCamillo's book *The Tiger Rising*, the protagonist, Rob, lives in a motel called The Kentucky Star with his father. His mother is dead. During the course of the novel he interacts with several other characters including a prissy girl named Sistine, some bullies named Norton and Billy, and the hotel owner who pays him to feed the caged tiger he keeps out back. We know Rob takes a bus to school and that he likes to go walking in the forest behind the hotel. Social dynamics are the places and people with whom your character interacts.

TALENTS/HOBBIES: The final details of your character's background are his talents. These are the things he is good at, or that interest him in some way. Peter Parker is a protégé of science, a boy genius. He also has the ability to shoot spider webs from his wrists and climb up the sides of buildings. Maniac Magee, from Jerry Spinelli's novel of the same name, loves to run and is a great problem solver. Harry Potter uses magic. Violet in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is good at building useful contraptions out of spare parts. Your character might be really good with horses, have superpowers, or is an expert in the field of Egyptian Hieroglyphics. The choice is up to you.

SUMMARY

For readers to relate to the characters in your story, the characters need to be given traits that make them seem like real people. This is called *characterization* and can be divided into three groups: *Physical Traits, Psychological Traits, Personality Traits, and Backstory.*

ASSIGNMENT #1

Read the story "The Last Leaf" by O. Henry. Note the description of the character Old Behrman in the middle of the story. What physical, psychological and personality traits are revealed? How does he feel about his work as a painter? What technique does the author use to tell us that he is of German descent? What is Behrman's weakness? When you have finished reading the story, complete the character sketch for your own story on the following page.

CHARACTER SKETCH

NAME: _____

AGE: _____ GENDER: M F ROLE: _____

PHYSICAL TRAITS:

Ethnicity: _____ Eye Color: _____ Build: _____

Hair Style/Color: _____ Glasses/Braces: _____

Skin Tone: _____ Freckles/Birthmarks: _____

Disability: _____ Dress Style: _____

Speech Patterns: _____ Mannerisms: _____

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS:

Phobias: _____

Weaknesses: _____

Secret Problem: _____

Talents: _____

PERSONALITY TRAITS: (Circle all that apply. Add others as desired.)

Shy	Pessimistic	Stubborn	Talkative	Patient
Timid	Short-tempered	Lazy	Optimistic	Kind
Insecure	Impatient	Tactless	Organized	Cheerful
Depressed	Cynical	Humorous	Assertive	Faithful
Morose	Sullen	Gentle	Confident	Humble

BACKSTORY

Describe your character's history:

Describe his/her social dynamics:

Describe his/her talents and/or hobbies:
