

**SC NEW WRITERS CLASSES –
Characterization: From Cardboard Cutouts to Real People**

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- 1) *Plot does not drive the characters. Characters drive the plot.*
- 2) *It's not about watching the character win. It's about watching them try not to lose.*
- 3) *A reader must care about the character or the character isn't needed.*

How to make a reader care about your character?

- Stakes – Broccoli test. A kid doesn't want to eat broccoli, but babysitter wants him to.
- Likeability – Nice, intriguing, smart, charismatic, savvy – begs reader to crave more
- Interesting situation – Crazy, twist, challenge, unusual, challenging, emotional
- The protagonist cares – Life isn't easy, struggle to win, has to lose sometimes

Types of characters you may need (more than the good guy and bad guy):

- Protagonist
- Antagonist
- Love interests
- Sidekicks
- Agents of information
- Natives inherently knowledgeable
- Power figures / those in charge
- Victims
- Risk takers
- Wild cards

Rules of choosing characters to put in your novels:

- 1) They drive the story, not the other way around (reason for sagging middles in plots)
- 2) They have goals (regardless how secondary they are)
- 3) They have personal stakes.
- 4) When they speak, it's to achieve something (all characters have motivation)
- 5) At least your protagonist represents your theme (maybe other characters as well)
- 6) Each is an individual and is not a stereotype (must be three-dimensional)
- 7) Blacklist, Downton Abbey, Game of Thrones, Lord of the Rings, Castle, NCIS

What helps make a character three-dimensional?

- 1) A lack of something, sometimes the character doesn't even know what it is
- 2) A yearning as a result of 1)
- 3) A weakness or wound interferes with achieving
- 4) Something happens that triggers a desire to overcome

-OR SIMPLY - A yearning for a need but doesn't have the tools to achieve it, until something happens to spawn the desire to go for it. (Almost like the short synopsis.)

Synopsis Murder on Edisto: *Her husband murdered by the Russian mob, Boston detective Callie Jean Morgan suffers a mental break and relinquishes her badge to relocate home to South Carolina. She hopes to reclaim her life and raise her son, but she arrives on Edisto Beach to find her neighbor murdered, her sanity challenged, and her home repeatedly violated as she fights not to get involved in crime solving, when that's exactly what she has to do.*

- 1) Lack of something - Callie Morgan lacks direction to her life.
- 2) Yearning – Seeks peace, place to live, any life away from law enforcement.
- 3) Weakness that interferes – She failed, losing her husband, fears going back as a cop. She has panic attacks and drinks. Her son hates law enforcement. Her expertise IS the law.
- 4) The Triggers – Murder of someone she cares for, then crime all around her, and nobody know how to pursue the situation but her.
- 5) Result – She finds satisfaction in solving crime and saving lives. She finds stability in solving the crimes, proving her worth, identifying her strengths and owning them.

Synopsis Jaws: *When a young woman is killed by a shark while skinny-dipping near the New England tourist town of Amity Island, police chief Martin Brody wants to close the beaches, but the mayor overrules him, fearing that the loss of tourist revenue will cripple the town. Ichthyologist Matt Hooper and grizzled ship captain Quint offer to help Brody capture the killer beast, and the trio engage in an epic battle of man vs. nature.*

- 1) Lack of something – fear of water (more subconscious), backing of the town, insecure
- 2) Yearning – control in role as sheriff
- 3) Weakness that interferes – he's the odd guy, the outsider, trying to fit in
- 4) The Triggers – people get eaten – especially the Kintner boy, and almost his own son
- 5) Result – he forgets the rules, the politics, and his fear of water and defeats the shark

****SEE CHARACTER ARC****

Characters need ARCs (or else the character isn't needed – or is boring).

ARC: *The internal conflict and progress a character makes in the life of a novel that changed the character in some way.*

Define your character's ARC by considering the following:

- Internal struggle
- Personal change as plot escalates
- Suffering involved
- Failure at changing
- Backsliding that occurs
- Lashing out due to backsliding/obstacles/lack of confidence
- Where does he behave the opposite of what he should?

Basic Character ARC

- 1) **Longing** – a desire or wish
- 2) **Need** – the tool, item, or situation that fulfills the desire – may be unknown to character
- 3) **Wound** – from the past – how grew up, last job, last relationship, often kept secret – you'll crave to explain all this in backstory at the beginning, but don't
- 4) **Belief system** – this belief system has grown from the wound – it filters the world for the character and affects how he makes decisions
- 5) **Fear** – anything that has the chance of reopening the wound - the WOUND and the FEAR go hand in hand – also may have a fear that what's at stake will divulge his past and secrets to the world
- 6) **Trigger** – the catalyst that forced the character to pursue the plot regardless the wound and the fear. This raises stakes for the protagonist and possibly others. Often it takes a fear for others to reach past self fear.

Arc Beginning – the false, guarded identity

Arc Ending – the essence – what's under the armor comes forth

Types of Conflict for your Character

- **External Conflict / Plot ARC** – the problem your character faces on the outside – the main thrust of your story/plot. This is what gets solved by the end of the book. Every scene must work toward this end.
 - a. **What is the main problem your protag needs to solve?** (core conflict)
 - b. **What 5 things can your protag do to solve the problem?** (major plot points)
- **Internal Conflict / Character ARC** – the problem your character faces on the inside – a personal struggle that often deals with the character's belief system.
 - a. **What is the internal problem of your protag?**
 - b. **In what 5 ways can this problem put your protag in an impossible situation?**
- **Clash of External and Internal** – your character fights with both – keeps the story unpredictable because it keeps the plot from being straightforward – character can even sabotage herself because of the two struggles being at odds
 - a. **What are 5 ways in which the inner problem can directly oppose the external problem?**

- 1) Understanding your character's ARC helps you know what buttons to push in the plot.
- 2) Your character's morph from beginning (FALSE or GUARDED IDENTITY) to the end (ESSENCE) is accepting what's under the armor, and this acceptance is often what allows him to figure out and conquer the plot or problem.
- 3) At climax, this fear will be presented in some way, so character can overcome. That doesn't mean there won't be sacrifice.

Character Arc

- Longing
- Need (may be unknown)
- Wound from past
- Belief system that rose from wound
- Fear of reopening wound
- Trigger

False, guarded
identity

Essence -
what's under
the armor

Your character accepting
his essence is often what
allows him to figure the plot.

This ARC/journey helps you
as the author know what
buttons to push in the plot arc.

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Let's look at the character ARC deeper:

- **Inciting event** (establishes the identity character is living with)
- **Act one climax** (failure in the quest, gives a hint of the character's essence)
- **Mid-point** (attempt at living in the essence fails, but essence is seen/identified)
- **Act two climax** (fear of failure makes character run from the essence instead of embracing because already failed at least once trying to embrace)
- **Climax** (character digs deep, embraces their essence, and wins)

How do you know where to start with your character's arc?

Character interviews (to include protagonist, antagonist, strong secondaries) help introduce you to the players so that you inherently know them, and can write instinctively. (**Keep a bible.**)

Appearance	Life-altering event	Relationships	Family – parents et al
Worst fear	Education	Loose ends	Sports
Second worst fear	Genetic burden	Doors afraid to open	Color
Milestone success	Religion	Silly flaws	Weather / season
Failure	Hobbies	Silly habits	Residence(s)
Second failure	Politics	Scar/disability	Birthplace
Secret	Vehicles	Movies, music	Speech habits
Skill/gift/talent	Addictions / habits	Food / drink	Choice of friends
Longing or need	Past wound	Animals	Physical fitness
Introvert/Extrovert	Children	Ethnicity	Military

In addition to listing the characters, **ask them questions** and type the responses/reactions.

Ask several characters the same question and develop their individualism in how they answer.

Questions like:

- How would you react if you came home and found your house burgled?
- How do you like your steak?
- Why are/aren't you married?
- What did you think about the Oscars?
- What do you think of Common Core?
- Random questions you might ask someone you just met. (**Name some?**)

Give your protagonist and antagonist equal attention in terms of:

Strength	Problems to solve	A need to gain something
Noble/honorable purpose	Ability to change to meet a need	Attractive qualities
Need to overcome the other	Tough choices	Flaws

What can drive a good antagonist?

- A need to accomplish a specific task
- Personal desire
- High level of motivation
- High level of avoidance
- Need for personal gain
- Willingness to adapt to get his way
- A compelling personality/ charisma
- A relatable flaw
- An urge to hide self/things/facts
- The goal of the protagonist
- Something has to connect the protagonist to the antagonist in a strong way
- Reader must feel the motivation, not just watch the plot play out

An antagonist can be represented in the following conflicts:

- Person v. person
- Person v. self
- Person v. society
- Person v. setting (nature)

Where ARCs are needed:

- Protagonist – book and series
- Secondary characters – book and series
- Antagonist – book and series (if applicable)

Point of View can aid (covered more in depth in the Plotting class):

- Character arc development
- Depth of plotting
- Style of writing / voice
- Connection with reader

If you include Antagonist POV

- No halfway point – if use Antagonist POV, develop it fully with goals, motives, personality, see character profile
- Make the antagonist the hero of his own story
- PRO - Makes for better plots because both protagonist and antagonist are equally driven
- CON – Can steal the tension of the story – becomes a challenge to keep mystery active and alive when the reader knows both sides

Introducing your characters

- Don't have to use blocks of description.
- Let the story/plot continue through your description.
- Let a character's dialogue or reactions describe another character.

Adrift on Edisto - *The gurney rolled out to the dock, and Callie stood to the side and let the EMTs and Bobby do the heavy lifting, partly because she was chief, but mainly because she was ten inches shorter and eighty pounds lighter than most of them. It seemed to shame them for her to hoist weight in their presence. Sometimes being the damsel just made the most sense. It wasn't like they didn't know she'd offed her husband's murderer with a broken beer bottle, or sunk six rounds in the chest of her boyfriend's killer.*

Tidewater Murder - *One of the sharpest rural loan managers we had, Savannah Conroy slung attitude like paint on a canvas, wore sweaters like a Hollywood starlet, and managed an office like Steve Jobs. They'd built the Beaufort office around her to harness that charisma and then added two more counties to keep her busy.*

Lowcountry Bribe - *The broad shouldered hog farmer grinned with a hint of the romantic, flashing white teeth and peppermint breath from candies he carried in his pocket. Here stood a comedy of errors in fashion. He usually traipsed into the office in fresh denim overalls, a John Deere cap and a tan and black hounds tooth sport coat he'd inherited from his daddy. Wearing the coat was respectful of my position even though he towered over my average height. I reciprocated that respect.*

DIALOGUE - Conversation is the most effective tool to get to know a person.

Tags – used only for tempo when a beat or IM won't work – said, asked (mostly)

Beats – actions by the characters

Internal monologue – thoughts by the POV character

Tags

- Use a verb that a human actually can verbalize – SAID, ASK, MURMURED, CRIED, WHISPERED, SHOUTED
- Do NOT use physical actions – SHRUGGED, NODDED, WINKED, HISSED, CRINGED, HUFFED.

Dialogue should be **unique** enough to define each character (a little goes a long way)

Avoid –

- Excessive dialect
- Speechifying

Remember, with dialogue:

- 1) Each character needs something from the other.
- 2) Each line propels the plot.
- 3) Each conversation fleshes out the characters involved.

Echoes of Edisto – (Find the BEATS, TAGS, and IM)

“Callie?” Beverly caught her daughter in the hallway before Callie exited and reached the chief. “They’re leaving a mess on my doors,” she complained, pointing at the fingerprint technician.

Yes, let’s worry about smudges and ignore the crime. “No other option, Mother. They’ll take your prints as well, to rule them out of the ones they find. Just do as they ask. And can you bring me about three aspirin?”

Beverly held up her hands, flipping them over to analyze her nails.

“Jesus, Mother, they aren’t here to inspect your manicure.”

Beverly snatched her fingers closed. “I know that.”

QUOTES FROM CHUCK WENDIG, THRILLER AUTHOR – ABOUT DIALOGUE:

Characters talking can be confessional. It can be confrontational. It can be two characters trying NOT to tell each other things.

Sometimes it's best to let your characters have the time and the oxygen to be together and to vomit up words at one another. That doesn't mean it needs to be easy, and it damn sure doesn't mean it needs to be without tension. Far greater when tension is present.

Characters can dance around each other. They can expose themselves or one another (metaphorically). They fight, love, make up, rage, weep. Characters can be friends, they can be enemies, they can destroy their friendships, they can mend their adversity — all with words. WORDS. (dialogue)

Dialogue is easy to write, and it accelerates us through the story, both as a writer and as a reader. It's a slide, not a staircase.

But I don't just let dialogue be throwaway. It must be revealing to the reader and to the characters — and ideally, to me, as the writer.

I treat dialogue like an exchange of power: what is to be gained, what is to be lost? What do they want? What is their goal?

Dialogue has layers. Like with all elements of the story, it's best when it pulls double-duty. It's text and subtext. Plot and character.

Dialogue that moves nothing forward is a problem. Dialogue has to move the needle. It has to invoke or inspire change in some direction.

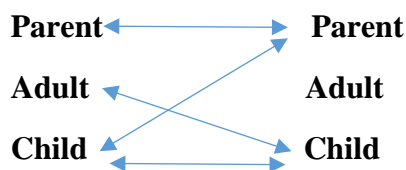
My goal at the end of a scene of dialogue is to have the characters be different — even slightly — at the end of it. CHANGED, somehow. The change might make them off-balance or be suddenly questioning themselves. They might be afraid, now. Or confident. Some vital shift.

The change to a character after dialogue might just be them more self-assured, or digging a deeper ditch for themselves.

I'll say only this one more thing: plot is best when it follows characters, not when characters follow it. Dialogue is part of this.

Tension between characters

- **Diversity in status** is key to showing character differences
- **Tension is caused by the dynamics of shifting** dominance and submissiveness
- This **status** is impacted by 3 things:
 - Relationship
 - Position
 - Situation
- What is a 2-dimensional character vs. a 3-D character?
 - Acts the same regardless the status
- Think of the roles you play when you interact with:
 - Your boss
 - Your lover
 - Your child
 - Your mother
 - A waitress
 - A telemarketer
- This of status another way (which one is the weakest and robs tension from a story?)



Remember:

Characters are not static.

They are constantly moving, growing, changing, evolving, eroding, confronting, and pushing the plot.

They are never always one thing – one level – one status.

Character development is the most important part of your writing; and dialogue is the most important part of character development.

And always - *Plot does not drive the characters. Characters drive the plot.*



There's something about being alone with your thoughts that makes ideas **pop**. But, alone at home it can be hard to find answers. Find the **encouragement** you need to **keep the flow going**.

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