

11. CHARACTER IN FICTION

Plausible, complex characters are crucial to successful storytelling. You can develop them in several ways.

- 1. Concreteness.** They have specific homes, possessions, medical histories, tastes in furniture, political opinions. Apart from creating verisimilitude, these concrete aspects of the characters should convey information about the story: does the hero smoke Marlboros because he's a rugged outdoorsman, or just because you do?
- 2. Symbolic association.** You can express a character's nature through objects or settings (a rusty sword, an apple orchard in bloom, a violent thunderstorm). These may not be understandable to the reader at first (or to you!), but they seem subconsciously right. Symbolic associations can be consciously "archetypal," linking the character to similar characters in literature. Or you may use symbols in some private system that the reader may or may not consciously grasp. Characters' names can form symbolic associations, though this practice has become less popular in modern fiction except in comic or ironic writing.
- 3. Speech.** The character's speech (both content and manner) helps to evoke personality: shy and reticent, aggressive and frank, coy, humorous. Both content and manner of speech should accurately reflect the character's social and ethnic background without stereotyping. If a character "speaks prose," his or her background should justify that rather artificial manner. If a character is inarticulate, that in itself should convey something.
- 4. Behavior.** From table manners to performance in hand-to-hand combat, each new example of behavior should be consistent with what we already know of the character, yet it should reveal some new aspect of personality. Behavior under different forms of stress should be especially revealing.
- 5. Motivation.** The characters should have good and sufficient reasons for their actions, and should carry those actions out with plausible skills. If we don't believe characters would do what the author tells us they do, the story fails.
- 6. Change.** Characters should respond to their experiences by changing — or by working hard to avoid changing. As they seek to carry out their agendas, run into conflicts, fail or succeed, and confront new problems, they will not stay the same people. If a character seems the same at the end of a story as at the beginning, the reader at least should be changed and be aware of whatever factors kept the character from growing and developing.

THE CHARACTER RESUME

One useful way to learn more about your characters is to fill out a “résumé” for them – at least for the more important ones. Such a résumé might include the following information:

Name:

Address & Phone Number:

Date & Place of Birth:

Height/Weight/Physical Description:

Citizenship/Ethnic Origin:

Parents’ Names & Occupations:

Other Family Members:

Spouse or Lover:

Friends’ Names & Occupations:

Social Class:

Education:

Occupation/Employer:

Social Class:

Salary:

Community Status:

Job-Related Skills:

Political Beliefs/Affiliations:

Hobbies/Recreations:

Personal Qualities (imagination, taste, etc.):

Ambitions:

Fears/Anxieties/Hangups:

Intelligence:

Sense of Humor:

Most Painful Setback/Disappointment:

Most Instructive/Meaningful Experience:

Health/Physical Condition/Distinguishing Marks/Disabilities:

Sexual Orientation/Experience/Values:

Tastes in food, drink, art, music, literature, decor, clothing:

Attitude toward Life:

Attitude toward Death:

Philosophy of Life (in a phrase):

You may not use all this information, and you may want to add your own categories, but a résumé certainly helps make your character come alive in your own mind.

The résumé can also give you helpful ideas on everything from explaining the character's motivation to conceiving dramatic incidents that demonstrate the character's personal traits. You may also find that as your characters tell you about themselves as you write, you can include what you learn in their résumés. It's often easier to consult your project bible about such traits rather than riffle through the manuscript, to remind yourself of the countless details you need to keep straight.

Assignment:

First, write a résumé for your protagonist, and another for your antagonist.

Second, write a few paragraphs in which each person describes, in first-person, a major failure or setback in his or her life. What the characters say, or don't say, may tell you a great deal about them.

From Write a Novel (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/novel/>), a resource created by Crawford Kilian, Communications Instructor at Capilano College, North Vancouver BC.

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