

Notes on Dwight Swain's *Creating Characters*

Condensed from Dwight V. Swain's *Creating Characters*
(Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 1990).

Chapter 1: The Core of Character

Q: What's the one key element any major character must have?

A: The ability to care.

The core of character lies in each individual story person's ability to *care* about something; to feel, implicitly or explicitly, that *something is important*. The character doesn't have to be aware that he feels the way he does, but that feeling must be strong enough to move him to *action*.

Not all characters have the same potential for building into a story. The freaky, repellant, stupid, boring, are unlikely candidates. Your best bets are sympathetic characters—characters with whom the reader is able to share and empathize, at least in imagination.

How do you make a character feel that something's important? You assign him an element he can care about, something that's very important to him. Choose what Character finds important in keeping with the story you're planning. When assigning a caring element to a character, you commit him to a stance which, implicitly or explicitly, consciously or unconsciously, he automatically will live by. Once you assign that important issue, you figure out (rationalize) why Character feels the way he does. To start your story, plunge him into a situation that challenges the part of him that cares, that threatens the thing he feels is important.

Chapter 2: Searching Out Your Characters

Q: How do you find the right character?

A: You scan the applicants until you locate one who turns you on and fits the part.

How do you create characters? Start from a foundation of your own fantasies and feelings, because the character you can't fantasize and feel will fail. Hunt until you find one whose looks you like, one who fits your private standard of what this character should be like. Don't trap yourself into working with a character you find drab or boring or tiresome. Keep on searching and shuffling until you spotlight someone who fits both your story's requirements and excites you.

How do you adapt characters to fit in your story? Alfred Hitchcock said, "First you decide what the characters are going to do, and then you provide them with enough characteristics to make it seem plausible that they should do it."

Figure out *why* the character thinks and does the things he does; *rationalize* the character's behavior: Provide plausible (but not necessarily true) reasons for conduct; to attribute one's actions to rational and creditable motives without analysis of the true and especially unconscious motives. You are free to create any kind of character you need, and have him do anything you can conceive, *provided that you rationalize the character's behavior in such a way that readers will*

believe it. You must temporarily suspend your own beliefs and attitudes to adopt those of the character you're creating.

Character is inextricably linked to context. Separated from situation, character creation becomes meaningless. A character must be in a certain situation in a certain environment to act the way he does.

The first step in creating an effective character is to look around for people who rouse strong feelings in you. People you admire, people you like, people that bother you or baffle you or that you detest. People who intrigue you. People whom you envy in terms of their attributes.

Chapter 3: Labels, Labels

Q: Why do you label a character?

A: Your reader needs some clue or two to help him recognize each of your story people.

The Dominant Impression

How do readers recognize your story people? By the *labels* you give them. A label captures a character's *dominant impression*—the combination of qualities that makes a particular character memorable to readers. "Remember that woman we met at the Harrelson's party? You know, the loud, pushy one. The one who used to be a travel agent."

Four basic elements go into labeling a character with a dominant impression:

Implicit:

- **Sex**—male or female?
- **Age**—boy, girl, old man, young woman, teenager?

Explicit:

- **Vocation**—a special *noun* that states the character's occupation, what he does for a living, his role in society: doctor, lawyer, homemaker, student, bag lady.
- **Manner**—a telling *adjective* that reveals an individual's personal bearing, his or her habitual stance and style. Why is manner important?
 1. Manner is what first impresses those who meet Character.
 2. Manner indicates to a considerable degree what's going on inside Character.
 3. A character's manner gives you something predictable to write to. You know in advance how he'll tend to behave, so you know the kind of words he's likely to speak and the things he's likely to do.

Just as situation provides a context for character, vocation gives you a context for manner. Combine the two to create a semblance of life: sloppy waitress, surly cop, forthright mill hand, friendly druggist, worried nurse.

How do you find the right adjective of manner? By observation. See the character in your mind's eye. What's their manner?

How do you *portray* Character's manner? By gathering *incidents* that convey *impressions*. Collect or devise bits which will reveal precisely *why* people think of Character

as a roughneck, saint, slattern, fool. What has he *done* that has led others to perceive him in such terms? “He’s such a pig—he never bothers to use a napkin, even when one’s available. He just wipes his mouth on his sleeve.” Anecdotes.

To broaden Character into something more than a stereotype, modify the label—insert *ifs*, *ands*, and *buts* to flesh him out.

You may introduce a character with a memorable or colorful tag—a toupee that slips, false teeth that click, a nervous tic.

Introducing Characters

Here are four possible ways to bring on a new character:

1. **Description or appearance.** Describe his appearance uniquely.
“The hair was what you noticed. It was bright orange and stacked on top of her head in what they used to call a beehive.”
2. **Action.** Show him doing something.
“The man ducked back into the shadows, one foot scraping on the pavement as if he couldn’t lift his leg.”
3. **Dialogue.** Record him talking and interacting with someone.
“‘Lookin for someone?’ Eleana turned. A woman stood in the doorway, an old woman a head shorter than she, with pinched features and squinty eyes. ‘Who are you?’ she gulped. ‘Me? Depends on who *you* are, what you want.’”
4. **Thoughts, introspection.** Narrate what he’s thinking.
“Edwards pondered, scanning the passersby and trying to define the person called X. A man, surely—or was it? The not really hadn’t given any hint.”

Chapter 4: Fleshing Out

Q: How do you make a character real?

A: You provide him or her with appropriate tags, traits, relationships, and weaknesses.

How do you “flesh out” a character? By giving him four things:

- Tags
- Traits
- Relationships
- Weaknesses

Tags

A *tag* is a limited, specialized label. It identifies a character and helps your readers to distinguish one story person from another. There are different types of tags:

- Name
- Appearance
- Ability
- Speech
- Mannerism
- Attitude

Name: A name is a tag. It should identify him, characterize him, and give your reader an idea of the kind of person he is and his role. Names may also characterize by telling of age.

Appearance: Your readers need at least some idea of what each character looks like. Hair color, eye color, way of dress. Any item that strikes a distinctive note will do (Long John Silver's peg leg, Kojak's lollipop, a tattoo, a drooping eyelid). Choose two or three items per major character and use each several times to keep readers reminded of exactly who this character is. Bring the tag on *in action*: Not, "She had small hands," but, "She reached up her tiny hands and adjusted her hat." "He wiped a beefy hand over his bald head."

Ability: Each character must have the ability to do whatever his role in the story calls for. If she must pick a lock in chapter 17, you must have established this fact previously. If he will perform CPR, perhaps he had training as a lifeguard in college. Think ahead and plan within your character the capacity to deal with the demands of your story situation. Determine the tags or traits that fill the bill. Then, make reference to them later as the story develops.

Speech: A character's speech pattern is important. He may be identified by repetitiveness, an accent, jargon from his profession. Make each character's speech pattern distinctive.

Mannerism: A character could have a mannerism that identifies him as an individual: rubbing the chin thoughtfully, an eye tick, a constant frown, a cackling laugh, fiddling with a cigarette, nervous hands).

Attitude: An attitude is a behavior pattern, a habitual way of reacting to a particular kind of situation. Racism and sexism are attitudes. Mary Poppins is always cheerful. Rambo always takes a macho stance.

To help distinguish characters, use *contrasting* tags. Names should be different. No two blondes or bald men.

Traits

Traits are a character's habitual modes of response and patterns of behavior. You start with a particular situation. How do you want a character to respond? Is the character a worrier, a soft touch, a hard case, a grouch, a freeloader, a bully? Is she cruel, kindly, pious, hypocritical, selfish, honest, fearful? You decide. Then thrust the character into situations that will give her the opportunity to *show* the stuff she's made of *before* a crisis arises, so your readers won't be taken aback when she behaves the way you need to her.

Relationships

This is the way we interface with others, our associations with and reactions to the people with whom we deal or come in contact. Two principles to remember: Like attracts like, and opposites attract.

You may also cast a given character *to* type or *against* type. Bit characters can be cast to type, to keep them from taking on undue importance (unless they are important). Major characters may be better cast against type, to prevent them from being stereotyped. Instead of the kindly priest, how about a cold-hearted one? How about a psychotic killer with a weakness for small animals?

Weaknesses

Like real people, every character has weaknesses. You use flaws to help control reader reaction to a character—to make the reader like or dislike her, accept or reject her. Decide what flaws you want to show in the course of a story.

Showing Characters

Traits can be abstract and general. Behavior, however, is concrete and specific. What does he or she *do* to demonstrate a trait, attitude, or weakness? Devise incidents and specific details that *show* the trait in action. Don't *say* a character is irritating; make him *do* something recognizably irritating.

Another way to show character is to let some other character recall or describe succinctly a convincing incident that makes the point (anecdote).

Keep in mind that deciding too many details early on in story development can lock you in and make it harder to adapt characters to story needs. Instead of starting with a detailed dossier, make a quick pass at laying out each major character: an occupation, fragments of physical description, dominant impression, basic attitude, plus any color details that come to mind. Then develop your dossier as you go along.

Chapter 5: The World Within, Part 1

Q: How do you motivate a character?

A: You devise something that he or she must change in order to win happiness.

Motive: A mental force that induces an act; a determining impulse; intention, purpose, design.

In fiction, *motive* is another name for a character's *desire for change*.

Happiness is the universal human goal. For an individual to move from unhappiness to happiness ordinarily means that some aspect of his or her situation—state of affairs or state of mind—must be *changed*. If the desire for change is so strong as to impel the character to *do* something about it, *take action* to achieve a goal, it constitutes a motive.

Give a character so compulsive a desire to make a given change that he can't let it be, and you have the basis for a story.

Happiness is a state of mind in a person when, his bodily needs being satisfied, he also feels a sense of self-importance, self-worth, and satisfaction. Happiness means different things to different people.

Unhappiness is something we all try to avoid. It's a loss of self-esteem as a result of disappointment or disapproval by self or others. Causes of unhappiness are different for each of us.

So, every character wants to avoid unhappiness and achieve happiness. This is the basic motivation that causes a character to pursue a goal.

You could also ask, What is Character afraid of? This is a values-based question. Some may be afraid of snakes, something concrete. Some may be afraid of something more abstract, such as losing face. What does the character want to avoid at all costs? What would he do to maintain what he wants?

Each character has a private past and a private future. Each character must also care about something, feel that some aspect of his world is important enough—important enough to fight for. To that end, a character needs an appropriate:

- Direction
- Goal
- Drive
- Attitude

Direction

A character's *direction* is his tendency to lead the kind of life he enjoys, tends to avoid unhappiness and pursue happiness. Any character has a gnawing sense of something that's missing from life. It could be something external, or something missing within himself. Whether or not he realizes it, he wants to control his life and destiny. Humans have five wishes:

- **Desire for adventure**—a yearning for a new experience
- **Security**—financial, job, family, transportation...
- **Recognition**—for a job well done, or fame (win an award, make headlines)
- **Response**—love on many levels from others
- **Power**—the authority to hire or fire, command over others

Each of us, consciously or not, selects a certain state or situation as constituting bliss. This is something a character must be willing to fight for to achieve or maintain. Because this state is different for everyone, characters may often find themselves in conflict with others who have different motives and bliss-states that interfere with their own direction.

Why do certain characters feel the way they do? No one knows. Your guess, your hypothesis, your rationalization, is as good as anyone's. To find something your character values enough to strive for, explore the three main areas of human activity: love, work, and society. Especially emphasize:

- *Possession* of an object a person, a status, a state of mind or being
- *Relief* from fear, oppression, humiliation, loss, pain
- *Revenge* for a slight, a loss, a betrayal

Goal

A *goal* is more specific than direction; it exists only in terms of an *existing situation* (the status quo). It's born out of *dissatisfaction* with the current state of that situation. That means there's some aspect of the situation the character wants to *change*. For example, because you've had your fifth child, your paycheck will no longer cover your expenses. Therefore, since your direction is to pay your bills and feed your family and still have a few bucks left over, you want to change the situation, so you set a *goal* to make more money (get a raise, find a new job, get a second job, etc.). There are two types of goals: *general* and *immediate*.

General Goals: (Story) A *story* is the record of how somebody deals with danger (change of the status quo), e.g., make more money. To reach a story goal, a character must attain a whole series of immediate goals, or interim goals.

Immediate Goals: (Chronicle) A character's attempt to attain a general goal is initiated by a first step, an immediate goal. The character's attempt to attain an immediate goal causes one change after another in his original situation that usually leads to defeat, thus complicating or changing the situation that plunges him into pursuing other immediate goals to set things right. Each immediate goal involves him in a new conflict that must be overcome.

When he strives to attain a goal, your character is *tested*. Only when your character fights against odds does he demonstrate whether he's worthy of being rewarded. If he can overcome all obstacles in morally correct ways—as well as overcome personal limitations and flaws—he will reach his goal.

Goals are important because, unless characters (major characters) have goals, the reader won't cheer for them. You maintain story interest by engendering sympathy from the reader, making her hope the character reaches his goal.

Drive

Drive is inner pressure, the intensity with which a character wants to change or reshape his situation. The end product of drive is the *attainment of the story goal*. Drive is the key ingredient of commitment. Couple commitment with direction and goal, and you produce the priceless "desire plus danger" combination that keeps readers turning pages.

You can give any character drive by deciding what he cares about, what's important to him, and whether he realizes it or not. Then upset his applecart by putting him—or someone or something he cares about—in danger. Change the status quo to make him unhappy. Make it vital to his

physical, spiritual, mental, or emotional well-being that he corrects the situation. This gives him a story goal and the drive to reach it. To give a character drive:

1. Devise something for him to care about, consciously or not, based on an event from the past that created a need.
2. Give him a suitable goal in view of the direction you have him heading (status quo).
3. Threaten that goal, that something he cares about (an inciting incident—the antagonist's success at his own immediate goal).
4. Establish reasons (internal or external) for him not to quit, reasons to continue to fight against the threat and reach his goal

External reasons: "The boat is sinking; if I don't bail, I'll drown."

Internal reasons: "I won't take charity" or "He saved my life." Pride, shame, duty, gratitude, loyalty, etc.

Attitude

Attitude is a feeling about some situation or subject, a consistent (yet possibly irrational) disposition that Character is reluctant to relinquish. A way of looking at life. An attitude is a hang-up that's hard to get rid of, a product of conditioning. Taken collectively, attitudes could be called *point of view*: a character's generally habitual, to-be-expected reactions to whatever aspect of life and the world that come to his attention in the story.

You must know well each character's *dominant attitude*. A dominant attitude may be modified by other coexisting—and possibly conflicting—attitudes. Character may hate discrimination against Jews, but has no problem discriminating against Christians. Remember, what goes on inside a character's head is not necessarily revealed to readers save in terms of the way that character behaves.

Be sure a character's attitude fits his noun of vocation. For example, a police officer may have one attitude toward law enforcement, a lawyer another, a criminal a third.

Every major character should have a secret: some hidden something he or she doesn't want exposed to the world.

Purpose and Motive

Purpose is what a character wants to *do*. Purpose is something you can *take action* to accomplish. *Motive* is *why* the character wants to do something. Motive is *rationalization*. *Purpose* is external-oriented, action-oriented, "to do"-oriented. It's born of direction and drive and attitude. *Motive*, in contrast, is an internal, private world, rationalization kind of thing.

The key issue is to be sure that any major character has a goal, a purpose, no matter how strange it may be, so long as it seems logical to Character at the time. Then you look inside Character's head and select an appropriate excuse (motive) for him having it and give him properly compelling pressures that force him to keep striving to attain it—physical and emotional reasons why he can't quit.

The trick is to decide what you need your character to DO to move your story in the direction you want it to go. Then rationalize the necessary "WHYS." This principle applies to all your story people.

Chapter 7: The Breath of Life

Q: How do you bring a character to life?

A: You make the character reveal emotion.

The Importance of Emotion

Stress is mental tension springing from emotion. *Emotion* is liking or disliking, feeling good or feeling bad about something. If it gives him pleasure, he seeks it out. If it gives him pain, he avoids it.

Direction is what makes us aware that a character is alive. Characters want to avoid pain, experience pleasure, so they head in that direction in life. But you as a writer are selling the reader emotion. You rouse their feelings by getting them to empathize with your main character and then putting that character in a situation that endangers or challenges his happiness.

Starting Your Story with Emotion

Most readers prefer fiction that rouses their emotions and evokes their feelings as soon as possible. There are two ways to do this: with a *hook*, or a *springboard*.

Hook: A *hook* is a scene at the beginning of a story that is striking and self-explanatory and plunges the character into danger in a manner that intrigues the readers. (Danger can be an event that merely disrupts anticipation.) You create a hook by raising the fear that something will or won't happen. A boy's mother dies, threatening his existence as he knows it.

Springboard: A *springboard* scene presents Character engaged in some motivated action, presenting him as having direction, being involved in some relatively inconsequential purpose. This builds into a scene that puts the character in a position to be endangered; his ordered existence is disrupted. The key is to present Character as someone who has direction, some pattern of existence, which is interrupted by a change that forces him or her to make an adjustment. On her way to the drug store, Husband's wife is killed. He finds in her bag a pregnancy test kit.

Change = Danger

Every change constitutes a danger. Change demands that we adjust, adapt to a new set of rules, a different circumstance. If Character can't accept or adjust to the change, it constitutes a threat potentially holds danger (danger to the pursuit of happiness). The more important the status quo is to a character, the greater the emotion it will evoke. It may appear at first to be trivial, then lead into another event or events that reflect pure trauma. (You may use coincidence to get your hero *into* trouble, but not *out* of it.) You must see the potentialities of impending doom in everything that happens.

Most important is that your major characters somehow exhibit purpose and show direction. Character doesn't necessarily need to know he has a goal. It may be enough if he simply behaves

as if he's trying to attain an objective. We ultimately judge a character by what he does, not what he says.

A central character ordinarily will prove more satisfactory and easy to work with if he's *consciously* trying to do something, accomplish something—to change some aspect of the situation with which he's confronted and meets with trouble in the process. More emotion (and interest) is generated when goal-oriented effort is frustrated. Any goal is rooted in emotion.

Courage

Character must be larger than life in that he takes on challenges over and beyond us. Therefore, he must have a quality that, secretly, we all wish we had but frequently don't. That component is *courage*, the kind of courage that enables Character to challenge the fate life has dealt him in your story. Such courage raises Character above the crowd (even if you don't blatantly say so) and gives him the strength to fight on, win or lose.

Where most of us would back down, give up, surrender, he refuses to accept defeat. Such courage is something we all yearn for. It binds us to a story which chains of envy for the larger-than-life character who has it. This pattern is at the heart of the phenomenon of *reader identification*.

Chapter 8: Bent Twigs

Q: How much background should you give a character?

A: Only enough to make your reader believe in him.

To understand the present and the future of a character, explore his past. You must devise a believable background for your character, especially key elements or events in that background. Your rationalization of a character and his behavior will only make sense if Character has a past, because a character's set, his attitudes, are learned behavior, based on long-time conditioning through repetition of an experience or pattern of thinking over and over.

You must tie Character's dominant attitude in any story incident to a single, memorable past event. If you can, capture that formative event in a mental picture, a sensory snapshot that flashes into Character's mind's eye whenever he thinks about Event. An anecdote or a flashback can convey this information to the reader.

You don't have to spell out the reasons for everything your story people do. To keep Character's thought processes hidden until the right moment, use these techniques:

- **State the reason for behavior flat out at the moment the character engages in the behavior.**
“Grimly, he scrubbed his hands. ‘Germs!’ He knew they were dangerous because he had watched his brother die of anthrax.”
- **Let other characters speculate.**
“I wonder why she did that. I don't care much for garlic either, but to slap a guy's face just because it's on his breath....”

- **Present the information subjectively, in Character's viewpoint.**

“The snake! He was instantly back in the blackness of a childhood night, shuddering under the cold form coiling about his hot face. He jumped back, stumbling over a stone as the rattler raised its angular head.”

When you use these fragments, make them important to your character by assigning each memory a lesson learned or an emotion evoked, in keeping with the rationalization for story purposes.

Reader recall is short, so you may want to make an emotional habit pattern a running gag or wave it as a tag.

Building Background

You build a character's background for three main reasons:

1. You want to make the character unique.
2. You want to give the character reasons for behaving as he does.
3. You want to make him believable, to give him depth.

Failure to develop background adequately results in caricature, which can be useful for minor characters, but insufficient for major ones. At the same time, don't overload characters with background. A character is a *simulation* of a human being, not the real thing. Whether you use all the information, probe Character's background by assigning the elements that have shaped him into the individual he is today.

Your first step is to decide on the *role* Character plays—the things he has to do, the functions he has to perform. Then check this against each of the four components of background:

- Body
- Environment
- Experience
- Ideas

Finally, choose and build up pertinent aspects from each category in terms of incidents, anecdotes, word pictures that create the impression you want Character to make on your readers. If you want to convince readers that Character is cruel and vicious, introduce an incident in which Character recalls the pleasure he felt when he poisoned his little brother's puppy.

Consistency is the essential element in any character, no matter how disparate or unlikely of association its components may seem at first glance. Toward that end, you build background with four elements: body, environment, experience, and ideas.

Body

Body begins with ancestry—heredity, genetic roots. When creating characters, pay attention to age, sex, and health. Body appearance is also included here.

Environment

Environment is more than just a character's surroundings. It captures more than setting or landscape, including a social setting. What are the economics of your character's background? Their family life? Social and religious taboos? Ask yourself what societies or groups does your character give allegiance? What do these groups demand of him? Do they involve implicit beliefs and standards that might affect your story? This is of special importance if your character leaves his native environment for another where the rules and standards are different. Remember that each character is a product of his or her environment—social as well as physical. Therefore, you must know:

- The rules and conduct patterns that govern behavior in that particular setting
- The degree to which Character follows or deviates from these rules
- Whether your story takes place in that same environment or a different one

Experience

Experience are life events that shape your characters. No two people respond to an experience, traumatic or otherwise, in exactly the same way. We each interpret each event in a highly individualized manner. It's not an experience that necessarily creates trauma, but the way a character *reacts* to it.

You must decide the impact of any experience on your characters. You devise experiences, incidents in the past, to fit your story needs. Then you give these experiences the meaning—to both Character and readers—that you want them to have. In a word, you *rationalize* them.

Ideas

Ideas shape both you and the characters you write about. Characters live in a political climate churning with ideas. Let your characters think, believe, explore unique alleyways of opinion. Give them private concepts to ponder, but don't allow characters' attitudes to become propaganda.

Summary

Background can be summed up as "reasons why":

- Reasons why a character does the things he does
- Reasons why he doesn't do others

Ask questions:

- Does anything about Character's *body* have a bearing on his feeling, his thinking, his behavior, within the story framework?
- How about his *environment*?
- His *experience*?
- His *ideas*?

Chapter 9: Wild Cards

Q: What goes into building an offbeat character?

A: The same elements that you use in creating any character—only more so.

You develop an eccentric character the same as any other story person. You label him with a dominant impression, flesh him out with tags and traits, assign him an appropriate rationale as needed in terms of purpose, motive and background.

Eccentrics

An *eccentric* is someone who deviates from accepted usage or conduct. An eccentric follows his own rules of behavior 24 hours a day—because:

- He knows his code is right and everyone else is wrong.
- He does not want to compete by conventional standards.
- Eccentricity seems the only way to gain recognition as an individual.

Eccentrics are valuable because by their difference and uniqueness, they create reader interest beyond that generated by ordinary, or “normal,” characters.

An eccentric is someone who, consciously or unconsciously, feels a tremendous need to maintain his individuality. So he selects some limited aspect of life and living in which he holds unbendingly to his private standards. His whim is the Gibraltar to which he clings and on which he has erected his entire personality structure. In all likelihood, he's obsessive-compulsive, or possibly schizoid—a loner, shy and unsociable. Ordinarily, he's looked upon as different, an odd-ball, by other characters.

To develop an eccentric character, ask yourself three questions:

1. What form does Eccentric's eccentricity take?

What does Eccentric say or do that shows that he's eccentric? Rationalize.

2. What purpose does it serve for him?

What does Eccentric hope to gain by his peculiarities or offbeat lifestyle? His eccentricities must be logical to him and add up to something meaningful in the story framework. Keep character's behavior consistent.

3. How do you want readers to feel about him?

Your answers determine the kind of incidents in which you'll involve your Eccentric, the specific bits of action and business and color you devise to show him to best advantage to get the audience reaction you desire.

Psychos

An eccentric tends to be open about his particular aberration(s) and viewed as harmless. The *psycho*, however, hides his and is mistrusted or feared. Eccentric is harmless; psycho is a menace.

Three questions will help you develop a psycho character:

1. What does Psycho *do* that reveals his deviance?
2. How does he mask (hide) it from other characters?
3. What logic lies behind his madness?

Irrationality is action a character takes that he knows better than to do (if Character were normal). The viewpoint character is almost always rational. You may or may not want to make your Psycho a viewpoint character based on how much mystery you want to shroud him in, or how much information you want to hide from the reader. If Psycho will be a viewpoint character, you must devise ways to show his irrationality through viewpoint insights—looking into Character's head and revealing what he's thinking—or objectively, via Character's dialogue or behavior.

The Psycho may be perfectly aware that he's acting in a socially unacceptable manner and against his own best interests. Or his behavior may seem entirely logical to him. Even if he recognizes that it makes no sense, he may be at a loss to control the impulse to act so. In any case, he goes right on doing what he's doing. Why? It's a situation in which tension has built up to a point where emotion so overloads intellect as to bring on a loss of rational control. Some triggering event sets him off, and he must do what he must do.

Appearance will play a considerable role in characterizing your Psycho, as will changes in appearance. *Behavior*, too, will play an important role. More subtle are *inner twists and changes* and how they manifest themselves outwardly as behavior.

Remember that one personality type or problem does not change into another. Even Psychos are internally consistent.

Chapter 10: The Role of Roles

Q: How do you treat a protagonist?

A: You shape the protagonist to fit the job he or she has to do in the story.

Making a Character Interesting

A dull character is a predictable character—one who always reacts in the same way. Provide this character with logical yet unanticipated aspects of personality so that readers can no longer take Character's behavior and reactions for granted.

Making a Character Memorable

Passive characters are forgettable, fatal to a story! Create memorable characters by focusing on some unique aspect of body, mind, background, or personality, then emphasizing it. Exaggerate it. Make it striking and colorful enough that *you* remember it, like Quasimodo's hump. Wave those tags! Mention them over and over again (preferable in action) so that your readers won't forget them and the character they belong to.

Working with Viewpoint Characters

In choosing a viewpoint character, you must limit yourself to presenting story information as he or she sees it. If you want to show Character in action from the outside, you must use another

character's viewpoint. Also remember that the interpretation of what's happening is strictly the viewpoint character's, and is not necessarily correct. This is a way to introduce deceit and subterfuge, gearing up for important surprises. Remember these five things where viewpoint characters are concerned:

1. It's through the viewpoint character that you orient your readers to a story, let them know whose story it is.
2. Being inside somebody's skin is a major way to grip your readers. It provides instant identification and empathy with the character.
3. Once you're inside somebody, in viewpoint, you can't legitimately enter another character's mind or thoughts. You can only show what that other character says or does.
4. A viewpoint character can't lie about his inner feelings. If you want to keep readers guessing, stay out of that character's head.
5. Your audience will be a key factor in choosing how much you use particular viewpoints.

Be sure to establish time, place, circumstance, and viewpoint each time you change viewpoint.

The Protagonist's Viewpoint

The *protagonist* is the character who has the *goal*, the individual who's trying to achieve something. Your first step in building the protagonist is asking, "Whose story is this?" Keep your protagonist an individual rather than a group. Since a story is the record of how somebody deals with danger, the protagonist is that character who's been made unhappy by a change in his or her situation and is thus goal-motivated to act to regain that happiness. Goal orientation is the main purpose with the protagonist.

Set up your protagonist with *climax potential*. This means he has *two* things vitally important to him: for example, love *and* security; financial independence *and* familial responsibility; the right woman *and* the right job. Put these issues in *conflict*. At the climax, your protagonist must face some form of physical or emotional disaster that forces him to choose between the two big things he cares about. But you plan and plant the story circumstances in such a way that when Character makes the "right" choice—morally right in view of your readers—he is rewarded with the happiness he sought at the story's beginning.

A story must have a fitting ending, one that is geared to the character's behavior in the story. This may not necessarily be a "happy" ending.

The Antagonist's Viewpoint

A "villain" may be better defined as the protagonist's opponent. He's not necessarily a bad person. He may be as good a person as the protagonist, but for the antagonist to get what *he* wants, the protagonist can't achieve *his* story goal and attain happiness. It's the antagonist who has instituted the change (the inciting incident) that's shattered the protagonist's status quo.

The strength of your villain is the strength of your story. He must fight back ruthlessly (albeit fairly) against the protagonist, just as the protagonist would, were he in the antagonist's shoes.

The key issue is that both sides are convinced they are right and both are willing to fight (not necessarily physically) to get their way.

Developing Minor Characters

These are incidental characters, the friends, coworkers, and waiters in your major characters' story lines. You develop these characters to varying degrees, according to their importance to your story. The more important ones should have some quirk, some bit of color or two that life them above the dull gray level.

If you devote a lot of words to a character, it makes her more important. So, ask yourself, "Does this character advance the story with his cleverness or color enough to warrant including all his lines or bits of business?" If not, cut them back.

Your story always concerns one primary figure: a protagonist whose happiness is threatened by a change. All else is incidental and must be held to proper proportion.

Making a Character More In-depth

To take your character beyond caricature, you must provide more than a dominant impression. Give him background, dreams, doubts, inner conflicts, etc., until the first impression becomes a detailed portrait. But don't go overboard!

The Non-human Character

The key point to remember when dealing with non-human characters is that, because humans can only understand humans, you must endow your non-humans with human attributes and traits. Answer three questions:

1. What are Alien's unique characteristics?

What's different about the alien from humans? What are his unique characteristics important to his character development and story needs?

2. What does Alien have in common with your readers?

Provide Alien with tags the reader can understand. Give it some aspect, some attribute that readers can identify with. E.T. was cute and homesick.

3. What is Alien's purpose?

What is Alien trying to do? Why is it important to Alien?

Make sure you frame your non-human character in a story world that makes his goal-striving and emotion both human and logical. Remember, emotion is the most important part of drama.

Chapter 12: The Right Words

Q: How do you describe a character effectively?

A: You build the character with significant specifics that lead readers to feel the way you want them to feel.

Your goal in writing a story is to create or evoke *feeling* in your reader. Readers read to experience *emotion*. If she doesn't, she'll stop reading.

When presenting story happenings, you want your reader to draw his own conclusions as to what's going on, how the characters feel. You do this by giving him appropriate stimuli to react to—in terms of sensory perceptions, not prepackaged emotions blurted out in statements. Don't tell him "Character was a nice man." Rather, show Character doing nice things. Reader will form his own opinion. In description, your goal should be to provide your readers with the raw material to enable them to draw their own conclusions.

Your most effective stimuli for getting through to readers are what are termed "significant details": details that both individualize the character and evoke the desired feelings about him. A character notices things according to what's important to him at the moment. If he's thirsty, the sound of running water will loom large. Leave out deadwood, generalities, details that have no bearing on the present action.

You must select, arrange, and describe your material in such a way to achieve a predetermined effect. The more specific you get, the more vivid you get. Concentrate on the telling detail. Use the dominant impression as a launching pad to introduce and describe Character, but then incorporate additional tags and traits that modify and flesh it out. That's where you get down to specifics. Don't write, "She was a tough-looking slut." Rather, "Her smudged tee-shirt was torn to the point that her bra-less left breast was almost falling out. The shirt bore the slogan, 'Candy is dandy, but sex doesn't rot your teeth!'"

Describing Characters for Emotion

First, settle on the feeling you want to convey. Then, instead of telling the reader what that feeling is or giving him your interpretation, draw a picture with significant details to let him decide for himself what it means. Such objective presentations are most effective when they concentrate on the *particular*, the *definite*, and the *concrete*—formulations that draw pictures in your readers' heads. Use vivid word pictures that bear down on things you can see and hear and smell and taste and touch. All our feelings spring from sensory perceptions. Use power nouns and active verbs to show Character taking action, *doing* something, rather than pondering or merely existing.

Remember to stay factual and non-judgmental. *Show* how the character looks and acts, and then let your readers extract whatever feelings they wish from it. Desired reader response will depend much on your providing Character with the right stimuli. If you want Character to get angry, give him something to be angry about.

DEEP CHARACTERIZATION

STEP	INFORMATION	QUESTION
Purpose	What is this character's purpose? What does he represent?	What is he supposed to <i>do</i> for your story plan?
Traumatic Past Event	Something traumatic has happened to the character at some time in the past (previous to the story) to create a emotional or psychological need, a "hole" in his life.	What is this traumatic event?
	This traumatic event has created a trait (a flaw) that, unless overcome, may lead to the character's downfall.	What is this weakness?
	He's got to <i>overcome</i> this past trauma and the weakness it created to reach his goal and find happiness now and for the future.	How does this weakness threaten his future happiness, if not overcome?
Greatest Need	This is the very thing the character <i>doesn't</i> want to face or cope with, but is <i>forced</i> to experience, confront, and deal with to get what he wants in the present story. This need is the driving force in his life.	Based on the traumatic past event, what's this character's Greatest Need?
Direction	Whether or not he knows it, the yearning for fulfillment of his Greatest Need is the driving force in the character's life. This need has produced an element about which he cares deeply, a factor very important to him. Consciously or not, he lives by this code, striving to have this need fulfilled.	Where is this character going?
	Yet he may be trying to fill the void with other things. This is the value that will clash with his Greatest Need in the Values Conflict.	What does <i>he</i> think and feel is most important to him? __ <i>Adventure</i> : a yearning for a new experience __ <i>Security</i> : financial, job, family, transportation... __ <i>Recognition</i> : for a job well done, or fame (win an award, make headlines) __ <i>Response</i> : love on many levels from others __ <i>Power</i> : the authority to hire or fire, command over others
Dominant Attitude	The character's dominant attitude is his consistent disposition and way of looking at life. This is his point of view and should fit his noun of vocation (e.g., "surly cop").	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the character's <i>dominant attitude</i>? • How has his past traumatic event helped to form his attitude? • Besides courage, what is this character's <i>strong point</i> that will help him overcome his flaw and fulfill his Greatest Need?

STEP	INFORMATION	QUESTION
Values Conflict	<p>Two values must be vitally important to your character. Only one is most morally right (and will fulfill his Greatest Need). The other (Direction value) is challenged during the crisis, and pursued as if it is most important.</p>	<p>What are these two values?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Direction</i> value _____ • <i>Greatest Need</i> value _____
	<p>By the end of the story, these values will <i>clash</i>. At the Climax, the protagonist will face some kind of physical or emotional disaster that forces him to <i>choose</i> (decide) between these two big things he cares about. Yet the protagonist makes it through his Bleakest Moment with a gift: understanding. At last he sees, he understands, something about life that he didn't before.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the character's Bleakest Moment? • What does the character understand after his Bleakest Moment that he didn't before?
	<p>When the character makes the morally right choice, he is rewarded with the happiness he sought at the story's beginning, although he may have attained something other than what he pursued (yet his Greatest Need is fulfilled). In resolving the story, the character's Greatest Need is satisfied.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the character's choice? • How is his Greatest Need fulfilled?
Crisis	<p>This is an event that the antagonist caused to happen or brought to the character's attention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has happened to endanger the character, to change his status quo? • What, specifically, has made him unhappy enough to be willing to <i>act</i> to bring about change?
Goal	<p>Your character must <i>do</i> something to change his situation. Because he is unhappy with his present circumstances, he sets a goal and decides to achieve it to change things for the better.</p>	<p>What is he motivated to strive for?</p> <p>___ <i>Possession</i> of an object, a person, a status, a state of mind or being</p> <p>___ <i>Relief</i> from fear, oppression, humiliation, loss, pain</p> <p>___ <i>Revenge</i> for a slight, a loss, a betrayal</p> <p>Exactly what has he decided to <i>do</i> to fix things?</p>

STEP	INFORMATION	QUESTION
Drive	Drive is the inner pressure that makes the character committed to pursuing his goal. The character's Traumatic Past Event created his Greatest Need.	How has his Traumatic Past Event created an inner need that must be fulfilled?
	Failing to achieve his goal will threaten him (physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally). Nonetheless, that goal will be threatened.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would failing to achieve his goal threaten him (physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally)? • How will reaching his goal be threatened?
	Because of his Greatest Need, the character is driven to achieve his goal. Because the stakes are high, he won't quit.	What are his reasons <i>not</i> to quit, to instead continue fighting? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>External, physical</i> (sink or swim) • <i>Internal, emotional</i> (march or forever be shamed)
Rationalization	After you have answered the previous questions, the character has developed a logical <i>motive</i> to act, based on internal reasoning. Look inside the character's head and heart and select an appropriate motive or excuse for why he will pursue his goal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why</i> does he do what he does? • Why does he <i>desire change</i>? • What is he most afraid of?

ANSWERS TO DEEP CHARACTERIZATION QUESTIONS

Purpose

What is he supposed to *do* for your story plan?

Traumatic Past Event

What *is* this traumatic event?

What is this weakness?

How does this weakness threaten his future happiness, if not overcome?

Greatest Need

Based on the traumatic past event, what's this character's Greatest Need?

Direction

Where is this character going?

What does *he* think and feel is most important to him?

__ *Adventure*: a yearning for a new experience

__ *Security*: financial, job, family, transportation...

__ *Recognition*: for a job well done, or fame (win an award, make headlines)

__ *Response*: love on many levels from others

__ *Power*: the authority to hire or fire, command over others

Dominant Attitude

What is the character's *dominant attitude*?

How has his past traumatic event helped to form his attitude?

Besides courage, what is this character's *strong point* that will help him overcome his flaw and fulfill his Greatest Need?

Values Conflict

What are these two values?

Direction value _____

Greatest Need value _____

What is the character's Bleakest Moment?

What does the character understand after his Bleakest Moment that he didn't before?

What is the character's choice?

How is his Greatest Need fulfilled?

Crisis

What has happened to endanger the character, to change his status quo?

What, specifically, has made him unhappy enough to be willing to *act* to bring about change?

Goal

What is he motivated to strive for?

___ *Possession* of an object, a person, a status, a state of mind or being

___ *Relief* from fear, oppression, humiliation, loss, pain

___ *Revenge* for a slight, a loss, a betrayal

Exactly what has he decided to *do* to fix things?

Drive

How has his Traumatic Past Event created an inner need that must be fulfilled?

How would failing to achieve his goal threaten him (physically, spiritually, mentally, emotionally)?

How will reaching his goal be threatened?

What are his reasons *not* to quit, to instead continue fighting?

- *External, physical* (sink or swim)
- *Internal, emotional* (march or forever be shamed)

Rationalization

Why does he do what he does?

Why does he *desire change*?

What is he most afraid of?