

THE 15-MINUTE CHARACTER CREATOR



**Strengthen your stories with
killer characterization.**

Nicola Martin

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Introduction

Let me start by telling you about the most cutting piece of feedback I've ever received. In my writing workshop group, there were eight of us crammed around a table in a pub, annotated papers strewn everywhere. We were trying to make ourselves heard over the insistent pop music playing through the speakers.

During a meeting of a critique group, you'll always receive comments like "that turn of phrase didn't work for me" or "I wasn't sure what was going on in that scene". Those criticisms nudge you towards making changes. However, in this memorable meeting, I received a line of feedback that floored me.

"Your writing is always very professional, but I just don't care what happens."

To be clear, the gentleman who delivered this withering put-down didn't mean it as either withering or a put-down. He was being sincere. He was being helpful by pointing out a problem with my writing.

But it was an issue I had no idea how to fix. How do you fix people *not caring* about your fiction?

Even the first part of his feedback was cutting – it cut right through my belief system. He was correct; I'd spent years making my writing as professional as possible. I laboured over my sentences, making them beautiful and succinct. My grammar? Impeccable.

If my writing was so professional, how could there be a problem? It took me months of pondering this man's comment to realise the heart of the problem. I'd been concentrating on grammar, word choice, metaphor, simile – all that sparkle that makes writing shimmer – but I'd been neglecting story and, most important of all, *character*.

The bottom line is: no one wants to read a gorgeous sentence about two-dimensional characters. They definitely don't want to read ten-thousand gorgeous sentences about two-dimensional characters in the form of a novel.

Readers will forget pretty metaphors. They'll also forget cool plot setpieces. What they'll remember – what drives them to continue reading – is your characters.

Emotion comes from characters and most of us read fiction for emotional release. Neglect your characters and your story will become... flat. Rote. Boring.

On the other hand, if you invest in creating vivid, multi-faceted characters that drive the story forward in every scene, it's tantamount to grabbing the reader by the throat and refusing to let go. Distinctive characters sell books.

How do I know? Following that fateful meeting with my writing group, I fundamentally changed my writing process. I began taking a "character-first" approach to writing. In short, I began using the process outlined in this ebook.

What changed afterwards? First, I began selling short stories – a lot of them, 50 to date – where I'd previously hit rejections. Then I signed a publishing deal for my first novel – and my second novel, and my third novel. My editor at Bloomsbury specifically mentioned that it was the strength of the main character that made my book stand out from the slush pile.

I'll say it again: distinctive characters sell books. My career as a writer is proof of that fact.

My 5 Principles of Characterization

Before we jump into my 15-minute character creator method, it's worth laying down a few principles about characterization. Like any "rules for writing", you should disregard them if they don't work for you, but they're lessons I've learned the hard way, so take a look, eh?

1. Character work is best done up front

"I'm just gonna start writing and see where it goes" is a familiar comment among writers. Listen, if it works for you, it works.

Personally, however, I think even the pantsiest pantsner should devote a few hours to character work before they begin writing their novel in earnest. Why? Characterization is the hardest thing to backfill.

For example, if over the course of your novel, you create a feisty, take-no-shit character, but a key plot point involves them letting someone walk all over them... well, that doesn't make sense, does it?

Character informs plot in a fundamental way. It changes every single decision the character makes on the page. Therefore, you need to know your characters right from the beginning, so that you know what choices they'll make in every situation.

2. Specific is better than general

Writers are often drawn to making their protagonist an “everyman”, either as a way to ensure mass appeal, or as a way to ponder Big Themes through a deliberately universal figure.

Unfortunately, there’s no such thing as an everyman. There’s no such thing as universal. We’re all our own specific kind of weirdos.

Yes, a character can have universal *traits* – they may care about their children, or value experiences over possessions – but they cannot be a universal figure. Also, to be pedantic, not even the universal traits I mentioned are actually universal. There are plenty of deadbeat parents around, and many people who’d rather have the latest designer handbag than go for a walk in nature.

If you try to create an everyman, you’ll only end up creating a bland, “nothing” character. No juice. No emotion. No reason to keep reading about them.

Instead of making a character generic, I recommend specificity. Make them quirky. Make them one-in-a-million. After all, the woman who wears a pink polka dot raincoat every day, even when it’s sunny, is far more memorable than the character who wears... y’know... clothes... general clothes... of a universal variety.

3. Active is better than passive

Here’s one I learned the hard way: your characters have gotta be active in the narrative, no excuses.

“But she’s an ordinary pensioner who wants a quiet life!” No.

“But he’s a regular dad who considers all the options before making a decision!” No.

“But they’re an observer... they’re an introvert... they’re meek and mild...” No, no, no.

Passive characters are unengaging characters. They don't drive the narrative. I know because I am one in real life. I'm not going out there to solve a mystery – why would I? I'm an introvert! I have TV to watch. I don't have the get-up-and-go to save the planet from invading aliens or gather together the whole community to save the beloved local bookshop.

Stories run on active characters – ones who have agency, who make big crazy decisions. Often, they're the type to act before they think, to throw themselves into the fray.

Yes, of course, you can create a protagonist who's meek and mild, and you might even be able to spin a compelling yarn about them, but believe me – I'm speaking from personal experience – you'll be pushing a boulder up a hill every day. Do yourself a favour and jettison your timid main character in favour of a rebel.

4. “Everyone arcs”

I'm borrowing this one from Blake Snyder, author of [*Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*](#). He says, “Every single character in your [story] must change over the course of your story.”

It's maddening, but it's true! Static characters are boring characters. We want to watch people make mistakes, learn from them, figure out who they want to be, and become better (or sometimes worse).

Therefore, every character in your novel needs an emotional arc. Some arcs will be front and centre in your story, foregrounding earth-shattering moments. Other arcs will have a payoff that's merely a small background moment that some readers will skim right past. Either way, it's good practice to figure out how each character will change as a result of what happens to them in your story.

(For more on emotional arcs, see Step 4.)

5. Not every character note you write will make it into your story (but that's OK)

Listen, I know writers hate to waste time on words that won't make it into their finished story. I get it.

You may read this ebook and think “why am I spending all this time, effort and word count on stuff that's not even core to my story?” Well, because it *is* core to your story. Not in the sense that you'll copy and paste every piece of character work you do into your manuscript, but because you're bringing your characters to life. That's worth the blood, sweat and tears.

A lot of what you write while doing the “15 minute” exercise will, technically, be wasted word count. It's still worth doing, though. It'll give you ideas for your plot. It'll flesh out a secondary character who was previously a walking stick figure. You'll discover killer details that make readers go “oooh”.

Yes, it may be a lot of extra words. No, most of those words won't make it into the finished book. But none of this character writing is wasted. Promise.

About the 15-Minute Character Creator

Fifteen minutes? Really?

Yes, really! I love characterization, but I've never had the mettle for those 100-question character sheets that you'll find online. What are your character's ten favourite songs? What's their social media handle? What kind of car did they drive when they were 19? Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Who cares?

I ended up winnowing down my character process precisely because I found those types of character sheets so boring. If you stay focused (and you take a couple of the shortcuts I suggest), you should be able to get steps 1 to 6 done in fifteen minutes.

Fair warning, Step 7 will take you longer. It's an optional add-on and I only use it for characters that play an active role in my story. Step 7 is, in all honesty, the secret sauce, though, so do this part of the character exercise if you can bear it.

Even incorporating Step 7, this process shouldn't take more than a couple of hours. In just two hours, you can go from a stick figure to a fully-formed character who feels interesting and "real" and can bear the weight of a whole novel. Not bad, eh?

Step 1: Stock Characters

How do you create great characters? Clichés.

Wait, what?

HI know, I know, you're trying to get away from clichéd characters! You don't want to end up with a cerebral surgeon who plays chess, or a giggling model who punctuates every sentence with "uh" and "like". However, clichés are a useful starting point.

Remember the advice "you can't edit a blank page"? It's true of characters, too. Editing a character cliché is easier than editing a blank page.

What are stock characters?

You'll be familiar with "stock characters" from sitcoms. In fact, a good example comes from 90s sitcom *Friends*. It's about six friends, living in New York City. There's the Clown (Chandler), the Nerd (Ross), the Casanova (Joey), the Control Freak (Monica), the Airhead (Rachel), and the Hippie (Phoebe).

Once you start looking, you'll find these types of stock characters everywhere, even in the most literary of novels.

Why use stock characters?

I started using stock characters as a starting point in my stories for probably the same reason the creators of *Friends* did. If you have a large cast of characters, all

of them approximately the same age, it can be difficult for the audience to tell them apart. Put them into different “boxes” and it immediately differentiates them.

(“I couldn’t remember who was who” is one of the most common complaints given by readers and you’d do well to take it seriously.)

I’m also drawn to stock characters because they break me out a cardinal writer sin. That is, creating characters who are just me with different haircuts.

Don’t get stuck in the cliché

Of course, I’m not advocating stuffing your story full of cringey, clichéd stock characters. This is only where we start. The subsequent steps of my character creator method will give you opportunities to “colour outside the lines” and create full, interesting characters that bear only a passing resemblance to sitcom clichés.

Smash stock characters together

In order to avoid too much cliché, I actually don’t recommend starting with a single stock character. I recommend starting with two contradictory stock characters and seeing what happens when you smash them together.

What if the Nerd was also a Casanova?

What if the Control Freak was also a Hippie?

Hopefully these what-ifs start tickling your brain in interesting ways. The point of this exercise, after all, is only to get your creative juices flowing.

When building your character, I recommend picking two or three stock characters from the following list. Pick stock characters at odds with their position in your story. (A CEO who’s a Hippie crossed with a Casanova. An investigator who’s a Clown crossed with a Doormat.) Pick at random, if you like! This is only your starting point.

The true secret of using stock characters to create characters is that, after you've spent some time with your character, you'll forget they were ever a cliché.

List of Stock Characters

I've tried to make this list as comprehensive as possible, but truly, there are stock characters everywhere in pop culture, so be prepared to add others that occur to you.

A word of warning: character clichés by definition use cultural shortcuts that can be offensive. It's on you to make sure your Sergeants aren't all male and your Airheads aren't all female; your Loudmouths aren't all Black and your Nerds aren't all Asian.

The Airhead

Ditzy, affable and frequently the butt of jokes, the Airhead is often loveable, like Andy from *Parks and Rec*. However, if their status is unaccountably high, they may come across as princess-y or entitled, like Cher from *Clueless*. They can also end up as an irritating buffoon, like Mr Bean.

The Boy Scout/Girl Scout

Loyal and likeable, this character is down to earth and honest to a fault. They always play by the rules, even when they shouldn't. They can come across as naïve to others, like Lesley in *Parks and Rec*, but their unshakeable optimism is their superpower.

The Casanova

This charmer has good looks and a silver tongue. They may be collecting notches on their bedpost, like the legend of Giacomo Casanova, or they may use their charms for popularity or business success (a salesperson is often a Casanova!).

A Casanova could be a charming child, like Manny from *Modern Family*, or they could merely be a Casanova Wannabe, like Tom from *Parks and Recreation*, who's not as charming as they believe.

The Casanova is fun and (yes) charming, but they can be a dark character, choosing to "seduce and destroy" their targets. According to outdated cultural norms, a male Casanova is considered more palatable than a female one, who's likely to be labelled a Maneater, like Samantha from *Sex and the City*.

The Clown

The Clown lives to make people laugh, which may be a mask for insecurity, as with Chandler in *Friends*. If their humour is affable, they're often easy to like and they may be the glue of their family or friend group. If their wit is acerbic or cutting, they could end up as an outsider, commentating on the group with a raised eyebrow.

The Control Freak

This Type-A personality is highly focused to the point of perfectionism and bossiness. They may be an alpha who excels in a demanding field (business, law, medicine) but struggles to relax, have fun and connect with people. Equally, they may end up rather wretched, always seeking perfection and never achieving it.

The Doormat

After a lifetime of being trodden all over, the Doormat may turn into a bit of a wimp, like Neville from *Harry Potter*. Perhaps they smile and shrug as things don't

go their way yet again, like a Pollyanna. Or perhaps every time someone dismisses them, their resentment grows.

The Eccentric

This weirdo doesn't think or act like everyone else. They may be spacey, New-Age-y, or way out there in Clouducuckooland, like Luna Lovegood from *Harry Potter*. Their offbeat personality means they may be socially shunned. However, they could be considered a dreamer who's able to see through the bullshit of everyday life, like Ponyboy from *The Outsiders*.

Most eccentrics are merely perceived as crazy, but others are actually crazy, full of tall tales, a legend in their own mind.

The Hippie

A love of nature and a peace-and-love philosophy make the Hippie a mellow presence who'd give you the shirt off their back, like Phoebe from *Friends*. "Can't we all just, y'know, get along?" How seriously you take their hippie credentials is often linked to their bank account. If they're doing yoga on the roof of their mansion, they can come across as hypocritical.

The Jock

This athletic specimen may be in training for a particular sport or simply as a way of life. They tend to be a highly motivated, clean living, salt-of-the-earth type, although may be rather humourless, like Andrew from *The Breakfast Club*.

The Loudmouth

The life of every party, this social butterfly may be bossy, sassy and prone to “popping off” if they’re riled up. They’re fun to be around, but you might not trust them with your secrets.

The Nerd

This know-it-all has plenty of scholastic achievements, but they’re often lacking in street smarts, common sense, or emotional intelligence. The Nerd can be insufferable, like Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*, or sweet, like Hermione in *Harry Potter*. A variant is the know-nothing know-it-all, who thinks they’re a genius when they’re really, really not.

The Rebel

This outsider refuses to play by the rules. Sometimes that means they end up on the wrong side of the law, although they may just be a badass who gets results in unorthodox ways. Like Erin Brockovich, they won’t take no for an answer. Rebels are usually cool, unless they turn out to be a rebel without a clue.

The Sergeant

Tough and military-minded, this GI Joe or Jane takes no shit. They may actually be in the Armed Forces, or they may bring that regimented mindset to their job as a police officer, firefighter, or other similar profession. Perhaps they’re long retired from this chain-of-command style of job, but they carry its principles into civilian life.

The Trickster

Mischievous and prone to playing tricks, this Puckish character – like, um, Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – is usually more infuriating than spiteful. Their chaotic presence can liven up a dull day, or they may exuberantly stumble into doing the wrong thing.

Building Your Character

Fill in the following information for your character.

Stock Character

1.

2.

3.

Step 2: Biographical Details

It's time for the small-talk section of this character creation method, where we find out our character's name, age and occupation.

I'm always surprised at the number of writers who choose to handwave this type of biographical information. "Oh, he's... y'know, in his thirties, he works in... an office or something." If you're writing in the first person, you may even be tempted to skip giving your character a name. Don't!

Specificity is what works when it comes to characterization. Readers are drawn towards characters that feel whole and fully developed. So let's figure out just who our character is...

Name

When you get down to it, a name has four functions. It communicates:

- ✂ the gender of the character
- ✂ the approximate age of the character
- ✂ the cultural background of the character
- ✂ something ineffable about their personality

A name should be doing some heavy lifting in terms of conjuring an image for the reader. For example, a Denise suggests a different type of character from a Finn

or a Malika. The last point about personality is, of course, the woolliest and it's up to you how much time/effort you put into selecting the absolute perfect name.

Try to avoid the classic pitfall of giving your character a name that's hugely popular on Top 100 lists right now, unless they're an actual baby. Hate to break it to you, but if your character is 30+, they're statistically more likely to be named something traditional like Rebecca, rather than something cool and colourful like Isla.

If you're truly trying to do this exercise in 15 minutes, it's fine to use a placeholder name. Although, I suggest putting at least *some* thought into the name, rather than plopping "Bob" into the name category. Unfortunately, it's true that boring name = boring character. (Apologies to any Bobs reading this.)

Age

As mentioned above, you shouldn't be tempted to handwave a character's age. Their age will help to inform their emotional wounds and preoccupations around life. For example, a twenty-four-year-old may be focused on having fun, while a twenty-nine-year-old might feel they should be settling down.

Job

There's a reason "what do you do?" is the most common small-talk question. Learning someone's job gives an immediate sense of how they spend their days (whether it's office-bound, or on a construction site, or taking to the skies as cabin crew). A job communicates – rightly or wrongly – a person's status in society. It gives clues to education level, class, and even personality (a children's entertainer is likely to be a very different person to an actuary).

Try to avoid drifting into cliché – you chose the Nerd as your stock character and now you’re picking engineer as his job. In fact, use contradictions to make your character more interesting – pick a job that’s completely at odds with their stereotype. (A Nerd who’s an exotic dancer? A Hippie who’s an engineer?)

Maybe you have no idea what job your character would do. If so, pick at random! It doesn’t matter what their job is, as long as you’re prepared to commit to making that job a part of their character.

→ *See the Resources section for useful lists of names and occupations.*

Building Your Character

Fill in the following information for your character.

Name:

Age:

Job:

Step 3: Hobbies and Quirks

You may be thinking, “My character is on a mission to save the world, who cares what their hobby is?”

Hobbies and quirks are important precisely because they make the character *more* than just their plot function. They make the character feel rooted in the world. They make the character feel relatable and perhaps a little odd. Odd is good, because it’s not bland. Bland characters are our enemy here.

Hobbies

One of the most common criticisms of poorly-characterized books I see is, “I just couldn’t imagine what this character was doing when they were ‘off screen’”. If your character doesn’t have life “off the page”, that’s a big problem. And hobbies are the solution!

By giving your character hobbies, you’re also generating sub-plots and background action for your story. Your character is solving a mystery, but she’s also due at a horse riding gymkhana! Oh, no, that’s a pickle!

What’s the key to selecting the right hobbies for your character? It’s a word I’m beginning to overuse in this book: contradictions! Pick hobbies that contrast with their job and their stock character type. A Hippie school teacher who also bakes cookies in her spare time is clichéd and boring. A Hippie school teacher who does jujitsu has a lot more juice.

When I'm picking hobbies for my characters, I usually choose a handful initially (the school teacher does jujitsu AND goes geocaching AND creates sculptures AND goes wild swimming). As the character creation process progresses, I often end up zeroing in on just one or two that fit best.

Quirks

Think about your friends, family, co-workers. I bet they have plenty of quirks. They walk everywhere, even when it's quicker to get the bus. They watch true crime documentaries as "relaxation". They eat more carrots than a rabbit. They're germaphobic, so they're always hand-sanitising.

Actually, those were all MY personality quirks. Yes, true crime is relaxing, shut up.

Quirks give your characters texture, nuance. They make the characters feel like real people. They can also impact the plot in interesting ways. What if a germaphobic character like me had to go down into the sewers in order to save the world? She'd do it, but she'd hate every minute of it.

Similar to hobbies, at this stage, you should pick a handful of personality quirks for your character – pick at random, if you like! – and, as you build the character further, you'll probably find some quirks stick and others fall away.

Energy Level

Based on their hobbies and quirks (as well as their job and age), you'll probably at this stage know what this character's energy level is like.

Do they bound into a room like a Labrador puppy? Or are they more of an Eeyore? Are they mellow or intense? Are they shot-out-a-cannon or ready for a nap?

Being “high energy” or “low energy” has a big impact on how someone acts, so it’s worth pinning this down now.

Sense of Humour

By now, you may be getting a picture of which brand of humour your character prefers. Here’s a list – pick one or two that feel right for your character, or just pick at random. (Again, picking at random is fine, as long as you’re prepared to commit to making it a part of that character’s identity.)

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| ☞ deadpan/dry/ironic | ☞ surreal/quirky |
| ☞ sarcastic | ☞ dad jokes |
| ☞ slapstick | ☞ toilet humour |
| ☞ satirical | ☞ cringe comedy |
| ☞ roast/shade | ☞ positive (“at least this didn’t happen”) |
| ☞ banter | ☞ highbrow (e.g. makes scholarly references) |
| ☞ puns | ☞ lowbrow/crude |
| ☞ self-deprecating | ☞ hyperbolic/ridiculous |
| ☞ awkward/unintentional humour | |
| ☞ controversial (racist/sexist/etc.) | |
| ☞ gallows humour | |

→ *See the Resources section for useful lists of hobbies and quirks.*

Building Your Character

Fill in the following information for your character.

Hobbies:

1.

2.

3.

Quirks:

1.

2.

3.

Energy Level:

Sense of Humour:

Step 4: Emotional Wound

At this point, we know a lot about our character and their external life – how they spend their days, how they present themselves in society. Now it's time to look at their interior life.

You could truly spend forever combing through a single character's psyche. I'm guessing you don't have the time or patience for that, so here's my shortcut: find their emotional wound.

We all have a particular moment in our life that changed us profoundly (and not for the better). Maybe the emotional wound is a source of pain, shame, embarrassment, trauma. Maybe we're getting over it – maybe we're not.

These wounds shape us. By giving your character a specific emotional wound, you'll shape them, too.

Wounds come from childhood, like bullying or a troubled family upbringing. They come from mental and physical strife, like having a learning difficulty or experiencing a major health episode. They come from romantic entanglements, like a relationship breakdown or betrayal. They come from work, whether it's having a toxic boss or watching your dream career slip away. They come out of the blue, like losing everything in a hurricane or being the victim of a crime. They're a result of poor judgement, such as ending up on the wrong side of the law or addicted to something that's killing you.

Depending on the type of story you're writing, the emotional wound might be recent or a long time past. The character might be letting the wound fester, or actively and admirably working to overcome the trauma.

Emotional wounds immediately suggest emotional arcs. A character with a toxic boss needs to summon the courage to stand up for themselves. A character damaged by a rocky relationship with their parents in childhood needs to learn to trust people. A character hit by a natural disaster has to rebuild their life and figure out what really matters.

Emotional wounds can provide a useful “emotional backbone” to a plot-driven story. (Yes, our character needs to save the world, but they also need to learn to trust people after being bullied in the past.) Or else they're just there, adding texture and realism to a story. Even if the emotional wound isn't core to the story, it adds resonance and helps your character feel real. Remember the advice from the introduction of this book: everyone arcs!

As an optional add-on to this section, create a list of lessons your character needs to learn. For example, someone who's bullied in the past needs to learn to trust someone. An uptight character needs to learn to let loose. A laid-back character needs to learn determination.

When you're plotting your story, you can use these lessons as a starting point for scenes and storylines where the character is forced to rethink their worldview. This is a straightforward way of adding emotional heart to your book.

→ *See the Resources section for useful lists of emotional wounds.*

Building Your Character

Fill in the following information for your character.

Emotional Wound:

Lessons to Learn:

1.

2.

3.

Step 5: Appearance

Yes, it may seem strange that we know about our character's darkest moment before we know the colour of their hair.

Personally, I don't love taking an "appearance first" approach to character creation. Finding a photo and "casting" your character right from the start can cause you to pile on the clichés and write yourself into a corner. ("This guy looks buff, so I guess his hobby is going to the gym...?")

I prefer to keep the character's appearance a little malleable initially, so that my mental picture of who they are forms naturally.

Physical Description

Indeed, by this stage, you might already be able to describe what your character looks like. If so, go ahead! Make sure to use as much detail as possible.

Specify not just hair colour but also eye colour, height, body type/build, posture. Tell me what they smell like, how they dress. Tell me if they have piercings, tattoos, a full face of makeup.

No, you might not incorporate every detail into your story, but it's better to know this info right from the start, so you don't accidentally give them eyes that are green on page one and blue on page seven, or a sleeve of tattoos that appears and then disappears.

If describing characters is easy for you, great. If you're having the opposite reaction – you have no idea what your character looks like or how to describe them – fear not! I have a sneaky tip for you.

Start building a cache of character descriptions ahead of time. I call this process “collecting faces”, because I’m a weirdo. When I have a spare five minutes and I’m in a busy place, I’ll get out a notebook and try to describe every person walking past in one or two sentences.

Later, I’ll revisit my descriptions and see whether I can picture the person I was describing. If not, I’ll bin that description as it was obviously no good. However, it’s surprising how many of these thumbnail character sketches immediately conjure the look and feel of a person.

The wet-weather, indoor-kid version of this exercise is to turn on the TV (keep it muted) and flip through the channels at random. Try to describe whoever walks on-screen. News programmes, documentaries and reality shows tend to be better for this than scripted TV or movies. Professional actors have a gloss and a sameness to them that’s difficult to describe and boring to read about. (Side note: If your character description is “she was pretty, with brown hair”, stop and try again. “Pretty” is too bland a description to be instructive.)

Once you have a good long list of descriptions of people, you can simply pluck one out and use it for the character you’re creating. Easy!

Defining Physical Characteristic

Many people in life tend to have one physical characteristic that defines them. When talking about them to a friend, you might say, “Remember George? He’s reeeeeeally tall.”

It's useful to give the reader a "hook" for each character, so that if they forget the rest of the description of the character, they'll at least remember that George was tall.

Think about the character you're creating. Maybe their hair is dyed blue. Maybe they dress in a three-piece suit, no matter the occasion. They're always accompanied by their dog, or wear crude slogan T-shirts, or have a chip in their front teeth.

In your physical description above, you might have already isolated their defining feature, but if not, figure that out now.

Speech

How a character speaks is as important and indicative as how they look. Someone who's fast-talking and gregarious gives a different impression to a person who has a clipped, no-nonsense affect.

- ✎ Loud or quiet?
- ✎ Vociferous or monosyllabic?
- ✎ Rambling or clipped?
- ✎ Polite and "hedging" or direct?
- ✎ Warm or cold?
- ✎ Sweet or sour? (If sweet, is it fake-nice?)

Pinning down a character's style of speech is important, because in a few pages' time, you're going to start writing in their "voice".

Building Your Character

Fill in the following information for your character.

Physical Description:

Defining Physical Characteristic:

Speech:

Step 6: Personality Traits

Some people love personality tests, others hate them. Regardless, if you're creating a character in 15 minutes, you don't have time for them!

That said, I do find it useful to place my character on a spectrum of five character traits. Now that your character has begun to come to life, it should naturally occur to you whether they're a rigid or unreliable, trusting or suspicious.

This list is based on the [Big Five](#) personality test. No person (or character) sits perfectly on one end of the scale between, say, conscientiousness and sloppiness; we all exist in shades of grey. For the sake of time, though, I suggest placing your character on approximately one end or the other of each spectrum.

Openness



High	Low
Curious	Pragmatic
Imaginative	Data-driven
Adventurous	Hard-headed
Unpredictable	Prefers a routine
"A dreamer"	

Conscientiousness



High	Low
Dutiful	Flexible
Organised	Spontaneous
Detail-oriented	Sloppy
Stubborn	Unreliable
Perfectionistic	"Big picture thinker"
Controlling	
"A planner"	

Extroversion

High

Energetic
Social
Assertive
Talkative
Attention-seeking

Low

Quiet
Low-key
Reserved
Needs alone time
Private
Aloof

Agreeableness

High

Kind
Generous
Trusting
Empathetic
Likes working in a team
“A pushover”

Low

Self-interested
Competitive
Suspicious
Dislikes working in a team
Argumentative

Neuroticism

High

Emotionally reactive,
Vulnerable to stress
Sensitive
Moody
“A worrier”

Low

Emotionally stable
Calm
Cold-blooded

Building Your Character

Fill in the following information for your character.

Openness: High/Low

Conscientiousness: High/Low

Extroversion: High/Low

Agreeableness: High/Low

Neuroticism: High/Low

Step 7: Freewriting

For all intents and purposes, you're now done. Phew! Congratulations. You've created a character, one that feels distinct and interesting and a little bit odd. In short, a character who's anything but bland.

Hopefully this process only took you about 15 minutes. If you'd now like to jump into writing your story, godspeed, you have my blessing.

However, if you want to *really* up your game in terms of characterization, I suggest doing an additional character exercise. That is, to spend a few pages writing from your character's first-person perspective all about their life and background.

Treat this as "freewriting", where you write without stopping and without editing. Write anything that comes into your head. The writing quality will be poor, but that doesn't matter. Nobody but you will read this. The idea is to get into your character's head, not to produce beautiful prose.

I usually spend an hour or two on this exercise. Yes, that's a lot of time doing "pre-writing", especially if you have half a dozen characters to create for your story. It's also pretty boring, I'm not gonna lie to you.

Why do it, then? Because it's a silver bullet. The first six stages of this process laid the groundwork, but doing this freewriting exercise is where your character truly comes to life. When you have a character that lives and breathes, it's going to elevate your story from ho-hum to can't-put-it-down.

Also, this character writing won't end up on the digital scrap heap. You'll use much of it in your story. It will inform your character's journey and provide a starting point for flashbacks that help the reader to understand them.

Of course, you can also look at the hobbies and quirks you chose for the character and elaborate on those if you like. If you already have a loose idea of your plot, start interrogating your character about situations from your story.

However, don't skimp on writing about your character's background, which will start long before the events of the story. We're trying to build up a picture of who they are as they walk "on stage" in the first chapter.

This type of freewriting is also a useful hack, because it tricks you into starting writing before you feel ready. By the time you type the words "chapter one", you'll already have pages and pages of useful writing that you can plunder for scenes and descriptions.

Good luck, go forth and create incredible characters who can power bestselling novels.

Building Your Character

Here are five crucial questions for you to use in your character freewriting:

- ✂ What was their childhood and upbringing like? What were their parents/carers like?
- ✂ How did they get their job and do they enjoy it? What would they rather be doing?
- ✂ What are their important relationships and friendships?
- ✂ What does a typical day look like for them?
- ✂ What don't they tell people about themselves? What are their secrets and fears?

Building Your Character – Worksheet

[Download this worksheet as an editable Word document](#)

Stock Character

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Name:

Age:

Job:

Hobbies:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Quirks:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Energy Level:

Sense of Humour:

Emotional Wound:

Lessons to Learn:

- 1.
- 2.

3.

Physical Description:

Defining Physical Characteristic:

Speech:

Personality Traits:

***Openness:** High/Low*

***Conscientiousness:** High/Low*

***Extroversion:** High/Low*

***Agreeableness:** High/Low*

***Neuroticism:** High/Low*

Freewriting Prompts:

- ✎ What was their childhood and upbringing like? What were their parents/carers like?
- ✎ How did they get their job and do they enjoy it? What would they rather be doing?
- ✎ What are their important relationships and friendships?
- ✎ What does a typical day look like for them?
- ✎ What don't they tell people about themselves? What are their secrets and fears?

Resources

Stock Characters

[TVTropes.org](#) – If you’d like to delve further into variations on stock characters, or find more examples of them, this crowd-sourced wiki is a great resource.

[Survivor Casting Types Podcast with Angie Caunce](#) – Some years ago, blogger Angie Caunce came up with a list of casting archetypes for the reality show Survivor. Fun fact, this is what set me on the path of using stock character types to “cast” my own characters. If you’re a reality TV fan, this is a fun listen.

Names

Laura Wattenberg’s [The Baby Name Wizard](#) (2013) – Any baby name book is useful to have to hand, but I like this one for writing purposes because it categorizes names in interesting ways (“Brisk and Breezy”, “Porch Sitters” and “Exotic Traditionals”, to name a few), which helps when you already have a character “vibe” but are still searching for the perfect name.

[Top 100 baby names in England and Wales: historical data](#) – An incredibly useful spreadsheet listing the most popular names from the 1900s right through to the 1990s. Great for making sure you’re matching your character’s name to their approximate age. More recent statistics around UK baby names can be found [here](#).

[United States Popular Baby Names by Decade](#) – A similar data set of popular baby names for the US

Occupations

[List of occupations – Career Dimension](#)

Hobbies

[List of hobbies – Wikipedia](#)

Quirks

[List of 500 character quirks and traits – Wattpad, by Slightly Strange](#)

Emotional Wounds

[Emotional Wound Thesaurus – One Stop for Writers](#)

Check out my Books

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed this ebook, give it a shout-out on social media or pass it on to a friend. You can also pay me back by checking out my books. (They're fantastic – I wouldn't lie to you. ☺)

***The Getaway* – [find out where to get your copy](#)**

Welcome to Keeper Island, the private Caribbean paradise where the cocktails are chilled, the guests are not, and new manager Lola is hoping nothing messes up her badly needed fresh start.

Her previous job in Hong Kong ended in tears – and quite a lot of blood – so she's come to Keeper to lie low, as well as to provide the gold-star service the resort's spoiled one-percenters expect. Her only connection to her previous life now is her old mentor and new boss, Mike Moxham.

But nothing is that simple, and no secret is truly safe forever. When Moxham is found dead less than a day after her arrival on the island, the rules Lola uses for working with the super-rich quickly become rules for survival:

*Be prepared for anything.
Trust no one.*

Because she might be next...

Bella Mackie meets *The White Lotus* in this twisty escapist thriller – as gulpable as rum punch and just as deadly.



***Dead Ringer* – [find out where to get your copy](#)**

Get ready to meet the other you.

Just upload your photo to get started. Using the latest facial recognition software, plus your votes, MeetYourDouble will find your doppelgänger. START NOW.

The idea is simple, vain, exciting. Tap the app, upload a picture, find your #deadringer – and if you like, set up a meeting in real life.

When Ella and Jem connect, the resemblance is uncanny, but their lives are polar opposites. One is stagnating in her Northern hometown, while the other, an aspiring actress living in a multimillion-pound mansion block, is a Chelsea socialite who knows she's skating on thin ice.

Other than their looks, their only similarity is the desire to escape. Is it possible to hide in your double's skin? And at what cost? *Dead Ringer* is an all-too-believable, twisty, compelling story that will leave you reeling.

