



# Lesson 5 | Creating Interesting & Relatable Characters

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## To Be Human

When we read stories, and a character stands out to us, we feel connected to them, or we downright hate them. But if there is one thing that we all hate, it's vanilla characters who have no personality, and overly villainous villains who revel in villainy who are so bad at being bad, it's a crime.

Why is it we dislike these characters so much?

The answer: **they lack complexity.** In other words, they're not **human.**

***Your characters are people. Treat them as such.***

I have a character who is very complex, has an air of mystery, and hidden motives that no one knows about. Oddly enough, this character didn't start that way.

The character started as an overpowered human who seemed to control the world around him with ease. Then, quite by accident, I revealed a more human side of him by killing off another character that he cared for and was trying to protect. Suddenly, he was not this super-powered hero, but a vengeful friend; his emotions became more human, and his character was much more complicated as a result.

*Emotionally relatable characters will draw readers into your story and cause them to invest in your character, be they a hero or villain.*

Where do we start writing a character that is emotionally engaging and human? Seems like a tall order, right?

If you were expecting me to follow that up and tell you it's super easy, and I have ten hacks that will help you do it in half the time, here is where you will find yourself very disappointed. It's hard to do and takes practice.

Good thing that's what this lesson is all about!

## **Build-A-Character**

For this first exercise, we're going to focus on emotions **you want** your character to feel throughout the story. Don't write their name, what they look like, what weapons or gadgets they'll be using; **focus solely on the emotions that you want them to feel.**

If you've completed the Brainstorming worksheet, then you might already have a character in mind to work on, but if not, that's okay! We're going to build a character from the ground up.

### **Exercise #1: Emotions**

There are no right or wrong emotions to write here; write down any that come to mind. Set a timer for 5 minutes, grab a pen, and let's do this. Go.

Well done! Now you have a pool of emotions you can dip into as you write.

### **Exercise #2: Heroes and Villains**

You've got some emotions; now you need to figure out what kind of character you are writing. For this exercise, I want you to write out what you *think* a hero and villain feel. Again, there are no right or wrong answers here.

Divide your paper into three columns. Write **Hero** on the left side of this sheet, then write

**Villain** on the right. Make sure to leave the middle strip **clear**!

Set your timer for 5 minutes. Go.

	HERO	?	VILLAIN
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

Okay, you should have a good list on either side. Are positive emotions more on the left side or the right side? How about the negative ones?

Next, I want you to write **Human** in the middle section I told you to keep clear. You're going to take equal parts from both the "Hero" side and the "Villain" side and mix them in the middle. For example, if you have ten emotions listed on each side, you'll take five from each and put them in the middle in any order you want. Make sense?

Take the next 5 minutes to go back over and list them out. Go.

	HERO	HUMAN	VILLAIN
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

You should now have a middle section with 12 (for example) emotions from both sides listed under "Human," symbolizing what a real character can look like.

As with anything writing related, these ideas are not hard and fast. There is nothing wrong with

having a paragon of good and an evil villain as long as they are interesting (i.e., an interesting story or plot.) Remember, not all heroes are entirely good, and not all villains are wholly evil. The world is rarely so black and white.

### Exercise #3: Traits

For this exercise, we're going to look at what traits you want your character to have. Like what we did up above, I want you to write out "Good Traits" and "Bad Traits," leaving the middle open.

*Traits are "a distinguishing quality (as of personal character)" as defined by Merriam-Webster. Attributes (another word for traits) are things such as honesty, integrity, loyalty, responsibility, etc.*

If you're not sure if something is a trait, a quick Google search should clear it up. Now, set your timer and write as many as you can come up with (double check everything **AFTER**, **not during**) in 5 minutes. Go.

	GOOD TRAITS	CHARACTER NAME	BAD RAITS
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

Alright, you should have a couple in each section to pull from. Instead of writing "Human" in the center section, I want you to write the name of your character that you namestormed in the Brainstorming lesson. If you don't have one, use "Bob" as a placeholder until you do. If you're wondering why you didn't do that with the emotions, we'll be coming to it soon.

Unlike the emotions, traits vary a little more based on the type of character you're writing. A villain will not have a lot of good characteristics, and vice versa for a hero, but each should have a healthy (or interesting) mix.

Take 5 minutes and choose at least 6 to go in the middle section you feel match with the character you are writing, and don't forget to consider what you picked for the emotions. Just because we're building a character a piece at a time doesn't mean we forget to look at the overall picture, am I right?

Ready? Go.

You should now have 12 core emotions (for example) and at least 5 core traits. These will be your baseline from which you can develop your character as you write, and you can repeat this as often as you need to.

## Exercise #4: Flaws

To quote the [Reedsy blog](#):

*"A character flaw is a negative quality in a character that affects them or others in a detrimental way.*

Character flaws will fall under three categories:

- **Minor flaw** - This one will have little to no impact on the main character or other characters around them. This could look like a quirk or something they say that annoys someone.
- **Major flaw** - This will carry more weight in the character's life and of those around them. This could look like an anger problem, or perhaps they drink too heavily, or they live a rebellious life.
- **Fatal flaw** - This is... well, fatal. Granted, it doesn't mean it will end in their death (though it could). It might be the end of a relationship, a giving up of a strongly held belief. Or it could lead to the physical death of a friend or loved one.

In this case, you might find that one of your traits from the previous exercise fits perfectly into one of these three categories, but if not, consider adding one Minor Flaw and one Major/Fatal Flaw to your character and see how it changes how they interact with the world and characters around them.

I recommend creating characters who have flaws that rub another character the wrong way. Why? Because it's a natural way of creating tension.

## Name and Backstory

By looking at the core emotions, traits, and flaws, we've set ourselves up to figure out the best name because we can look for names that fit with the personality. If you picked a name from your namestorming section, it's possible that you now think it no longer feels right, and that is okay!

It's important to note that not all names *have* to have a meaning behind them, but it can be a really fun easter egg for readers when you talk about how you came up with it.

If you're on the fence about it, this can help you determine if you want to keep the current name or change it. Before you start, go to [behindthename.com](http://behindthename.com)'s home page so that way you're ready to go.

Set your timer for 10 minutes and fill out the following sections about your character. (5 minutes looking for a new name and then the last 5 minutes for filling out the rest of it.)

Ready? Go!

Current Name:

Meaning:

New Name (if applicable):

Meaning:

Race (human, elf, cyborg, etc.):

Core Emotions:

Core Traits:

Flaw(s):

Hero/Villain/Other:

## **Character Backstory**

So, we have the beginnings of our character, and now we need a backstory. A backstory is hard to nail, and most of it, the reader will never even know, anyway! Why bother doing it at all?

Because, like us, our past influences our present. So it is with our characters. The reason they are the way they are is because of what happened to them in the past.

Thankfully, we're no longer working with a blank canvas! We know who they are based on their core emotions, traits, and flaws. All we have to do is work backward from there.

I'm going to challenge you to write out a Bio Snippet, which is kind of like your character's tagline, and then their actual bio; in 200 words.

Just 200 words? Yes! This forces you to be concise and to the point, and it will challenge you to get the words down. That's the point. If you don't push yourself, you're never going to grow as a writer, so here's your push. More will come in time; this is merely the beginning.

There is no time limit on these unless you set one for yourself. It will be challenging enough as is.

Bio Snippet: *ex. Bob's [emotion/trait/flaw] is what led him to an unexpected adventure.*

Character Bio (in 200 words):

## **Takeaways**

By now, you should have a character with emotion, traits, flaws, a name, a tagline, and a short bio! Good work!

You may have noticed we did things in reverse order than authors typically do. They will think of the character's looks first and then build off that, but when we start with what makes a character feel more human, it creates something much more dynamic.

I know you will have more characters in your story, and hopefully, this will allow you to continue to flesh them out when you hit roadblocks or when you need inspiration.