



Character



# Character

You may have been taught at some point that there are several words for describing characters—static, dynamic, flat, round. Here’s a quick refresher:

1. **Static:** This character doesn’t change. They are who they are, and at the end of the story they are still the same person they always were.
2. **Dynamic:** The opposite of static—this character has changed in some way. Something about them is affected during the story, and they are different by the end. (Note: Your main character should *definitely* be a dynamic character, at least in some small way.)
3. **Flat:** This person is pretty much just one thing—the cop, the mom, the quirky comic relief, the grumpy old man. We don’t see any other sides of them.

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4. Round: Like real people, these characters have more than one side. They act differently in different situations; something complicates them.

In any good story, you need a mix of all of these. Your main character *must* be dynamic, or they will be boring.

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If the events didn't affect the person most involved in them, they won't affect your reader either; the story isn't worth telling. It helps if your main character is also a bit round. Usually they will be, simply because we spend so much time with them. Even in the most action-

packed, plot-driven story, a good protagonist will have time to show another side of themselves.

Aside from the main character, you want a mix of the other types. Static and flat characters are not a *bad* thing to have; some characters need to be that way. The waitress may be a struggling single mom, but if that doesn't affect the main character's cross-country journey, for example, then we don't want to know that about her. It's a distraction from the main character. Leave her alone as "waitress" in this story, and make her the star of her own novel later, if you really like her.

That said, keep in mind that your side characters are also *people*. Some are round or dynamic people even though the spotlight isn't on them, and some are flat and static. But no matter who they are, the reader should get the

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sense that they are alive even when they are not involved in the story. “Mom” doesn’t just stand in the kitchen like a broken robot, waiting for the protagonist to walk in so she can bend down and take the pie out of the oven and say her usual greeting. Mom had to go to the store for the ingredients to make that pie.

There is a fine line between getting distracted by your side characters and making them real people. Sometimes, that line is one sentence long—a line of dialogue. Drop it in, here and there. If your main character is having a conversation with a side character, have them say something in one line that gives us a peek into what they’ve been doing today, what they’re about to do, or some aspect of their life *not* related to the protagonist and their conflict.

Remember—keep it short and relatively minor. No one drops major life drama in a one-sentence greeting, right after “Hi, Honey, how are you?” They might, however, mention where they’ve been or what they’ve been doing, or be reminded of some snippet from their own life. Real conversations tend to have those tidbits, so drop them in. Not all the time—if the exchange is short and we just need to take care of business quickly before moving to the next plot point, keep it focused. But if we’re having a “talk” with someone, make it feel real, like both characters are real people with real lives.

### The “What Are They Like” Test

This is a fantastic tool for checking how well you’ve fleshed out your main characters. Use this on the

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protagonist, as well as any other big secondary characters. If they appear often in the book, affect the events, or have a meaningful impact on the protagonist, include them in this test.

The test has one question, and the question is this: Describe this character without talking about how they look, their job, their relationship to someone else, what they wear, what they own, what they've done in their life, or what they do in the story. Describe who they are as a person—what they are *like*—to someone who has never read your story.

If you have a strong character, you should get a list of adjectives. Honest, sensitive, restless, irritable, caring, accident prone, a worrier, persistent, wounded, selfish, sweet, irresponsible, reckless—all these things will be based on what they do and how they act in your story, but if your characters don't act consistently, they won't give the reader a strong feeling of who they *are*.

This can be a tricky test for the author. Often the author has a very full and complete picture of their characters in their own head, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they have communicated those traits to the reader clearly. If at all possible, ask someone to read your story and then take this test. Use the list of words they give you as a check—if some of your main characters are too hard to describe, they need more opportunities to show who they are to the reader. If some of the traits you get back are the opposite of what you were going for, ask what actions or events made them seem that way. Then

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work on revising those parts to better show the person you intended to create.

Start small! Developing characters is *hard work*. Keep your main cast fairly limited until you get a handle on this process. Just a suggestion—try not to have more than four main characters in your first novel. Fewer characters will allow you to focus; the more you add above four, the harder it will be to develop them while still keeping your plot centered on the protagonist.