



DEVELOPING AUTHENTIC CHARACTERS

Coaching Strategies for Creating Complex, Memorable Characters

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WRITING AS PROCESS RATHER THAN PRODUCT

One of the critical skills any writer needs is the ability to develop **strong characters** that will **keep a reader's interest**. A strong character does not need to be a likable character; in fact, characters who are complicated and unlikable can be more engaging—and are often much **more fun to write**.

Often, **character development** work involves engaging in writing that will not end up ever being “officially” in the book. Some writers are resistant to “unofficial” writing practices because they don't want to waste what little time they have for the creative process engaging in writing that won't be in the actual finished product. I completely understand this! I also know that while a book (or complete short story) is your ultimate goal, the writing you engage in is much more than a product in and of itself.

Writing-as-process is a critical tool that all humans (even non-writers) can use to problem-solve, connect with creative energy, and develop innovative ideas. I love to encourage writers to spend as much time as they like in process-oriented creative exercises that invite a deeper (or refreshed) **connection with creative energy**.

Our creative brains need different types of stimulation, and these exercises can be helpful for writers who are feeling burnt out or exhausted in the midst of manuscript development or revision.

The **strategies** in this workbook are the same ones I offer to writers in **coaching sessions** and **workshops** to support character development. As always, reach out directly with questions or comments. I love to connect with fellow creatives!

– Kathleen Furin

EXERCISE #1:

100 THINGS ABOUT MY CHARACTER

I love this exercise because it allows you to be wild, imaginative and funny, and also tap into deep human truths.

This exercise is simple on the surface – simply **make a list of 100 qualities about your character**. Literally just go ahead and start listing things: my character has curly hair that she hates, my character loves pancakes because of the way they feel in her mouth, my character eats Twizzlers in the bathtub, my character refuses to wear pink, my character really wanted to be a ballerina but had no grace and flat feet, etc. The point is to try to be as **descriptive and expansive** as possible. Don't stop writing or censor yourself – just **flow**.

It's also important to be specific. For example, "my character is kind" is too vague. Instead, think along the lines of "my character is kind and always carries snacks to give out to anyone in the street who needs them (and once got in a huge argument with a man who asked her for food and then told her he was allergic to everything she had with her that day)." This is much more specific – and already there is a **story developing** that lets us know that perhaps this character is not as kind as she thinks she is, or as kind as she wants to be.

Think about what your **character loves and hates**. Look for contradictions or weird, quirky behavior. And don't worry if you don't get to 100 qualities! (I never have). The point is not to complete the list but to figure out something important about who your character is. Play around with this exercise until you have learned something new about your character – then carry that information into your draft and see what unfolds!

EXERCISE #2:

PRECISE PEOPLE-WATCHING

*Understanding truths about our collective humanity
is really what reading fiction is all about.*

Precise People-Watching: When you are riding on the subway or sitting in a coffee shop or waiting in a classroom or bored at work, pick someone to look at and study them as carefully as you can.

Write down **twenty things about their appearance**, trying not to use cliches. Get creative about ways to say "tall" or "has long hair." Look at their clothing and what they are wearing and what it may say about them. Look at anything unusual or interesting that might give you a **clue about their emotional state**.

Think about how **exterior appearances may reflect inner realities – or not**. This is another list exercise, but it forces you to pay attention and can offer good insights into who your character is.

EXERCISE #3:

CONVERSATION WITH A THERAPIST

Excellent fiction has the heartbeat of emotional resonance.

Conversation with a therapist: This is one of my favorite things to do with a character when I get stuck. I sit them down with an imaginary therapist and give them a nice long session. I will literally type out what the character says and then type out the therapist's response. This Q&A can really take you **deep into your character's psyche**. This is writing that will probably not end up on the page – but it matters anyway. You can start with simple questions and just go back and forth in a playful or more serious manner. Ask things like:

- What brings you in today?
- How are you feeling right now?
- Tell me more about...
- Why is this important to you today?
- What happened with (messy situation your character is involved in)?
- Help me understand...
- If you had a magic wand, what would you do?
- What is holding you back? (Or why won't you make better decisions already, dammit!)
- Etc!

Use this "session" to better understand your **character's motivation and desires** – what are they experiencing that is informing the present action?

Really DIG and get their **emotional vulnerability on the page** – always be asking yourself, what is the emotion beneath the emotion?

Keep asking them WHY they are acting as they are, or thinking or believing whatever it is they think or believe. Remember that excellent fiction has a heartbeat of emotional resonance, and you want to find that emotional wisdom in your work, if you can.

EXERCISE #4:

TAKE YOUR CHARACTER ON A FIELD TRIP

Have fun, play, and invite yourself to reconnect with your creative energy. Create an “Artist Date” for your character.

Take your character on a field trip: This is similar to Julia Cameron's “Artist Date” practice but it's focused on your character instead of you.

Take your germophobic character to a bowling alley and see **what she notices**. Take your shy character to a library or a museum she has never been to before, or if you really want to torture her make her go speed-dating or to a networking event. Have your character go on a hike alone. Have your character try rollerblading for the first time.

Whatever you choose to do, think about how your **character with their particular sensibility and quirks** would respond to whatever it is you are doing.

What's Next?

This week, devote some of your writing time to **writing-as-process** rather than product. I've included worksheets on the following pages to make this as easy (and enjoyable) as possible. Have fun, play, and invite yourself to reconnect with your creative energy as you discover information that might change the **arc of your work**, even if none of the writing you do ever makes it to the page of your final product.

After you have tried one of these exercises, answer these three questions:

1. **How did it feel** to invest time in writing-as-process?
2. Did you learn anything new or helpful that will **motivate you** to keep working on your manuscript? If so, how can you integrate this new knowledge?
3. Has your **relationship with your creative energy** changed as a result of trying writing-as-process?

If you found this helpful, look out for my upcoming newsletter, which will be on using empathy to deepen connection to characters, audience, and our creative selves.

WORKSHEET #1:

100 THINGS ABOUT MY CHARACTER

Brainstorm 100 Qualities About My Character:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Jot Down 20 Qualities From People Watching:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

WORKSHEET #3: CONVERSATION WITH A THERAPIST

Offer Your Character a Therapy Session to Reveal Inner Truths:

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WORKSHEET #4:

TAKE YOUR CHARACTER ON A FIELD TRIP

Create an "Artist Date" or New Experience For Your Character:

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