

Scott Editorial

Character Arc Workbook

An expanded workbook for building desire, fear, contradiction, pressure, and change across a full manuscript.



Designed as a working tool. Use it while drafting, revising, or preparing for editorial feedback. Be specific, be honest, and write directly onto the page.

How to use this workbook

Character arc is not decoration added after plotting. It is one of the engines that gives plot its force. Readers stay with characters when they sense inner pressure beneath outward action. They want to see not only what happens, but what the character is unwilling to face, what they are protecting, and what it might cost them to change.

Editor's note: Many manuscripts confuse backstory with arc. Backstory explains why a character is as they are. Arc is the movement that occurs because the story keeps pressing on that state until it can no longer hold.

The core arc model

Prompt	Your notes
Want	What does the character pursue at the surface level? Be concrete.
Need	What do they actually need in order to become more whole, honest, or capable of connection?
Fear	What truth, loss, or vulnerability are they trying to avoid?
Protective strategy	How do they manage life so they do not have to face that fear?
Pressure point	What in the plot makes that strategy stop working?
Change	What new way of seeing, acting, or relating must they earn by the end?

Start with contradiction

Great characters are rarely built from a single trait. They are built from contradiction. A dependable surgeon who lies in intimate relationships. A charming teacher who cannot bear being seen as needy. A loyal sister who uses loyalty as a way to control others. Contradiction produces friction, and friction produces scenes.

Example: contradiction in practice

Leila is admired for her calm leadership. Privately, she cannot tolerate uncertainty and manipulates every family decision. Her public strength and private rigidity can drive both plot and emotional rupture.

The backstory engine

Prompt	Your notes
Formative wound or absence	What happened, or failed to happen, that shaped the character's protective behaviour?
Interpretation	What meaning did the character take from that experience?
Rule for survival	What private rule do they now live by?
Cost of the rule	How does that rule limit intimacy, courage, flexibility, or truth?
Trigger	What kinds of people, places, remarks, or situations activate the wound?

The lie, the mask, and the habit

Some writers find it useful to name the false belief at the centre of the arc. Others prefer to think in terms of avoidance, habit, or a protective identity. Use whichever language unlocks the work for you. The important thing is to identify the pattern that keeps the character functional, but stuck.

Prompt	Your notes
False belief or limiting view	What does the character believe that narrows their choices?
Mask	How do they present themselves so this inner vulnerability stays hidden?
Habit under stress	What do they reliably do when threatened? Withdraw, perform, attack, joke, seduce, over-explain, disappear?
Moment of exposure	What kind of scene would strip that mask away?

Mapping arc across the novel

Prompt	Your notes
Opening state	Who is this person before the story starts pressing on them?
Inciting disruption	What event unsettles their usual way of managing life?
Early resistance	How do they double down on old habits?
Midpoint recognition	What can they no longer deny by the middle of the story?
Crisis	What impossible choice forces them to confront their fear directly?
Ending state	What has genuinely changed, and what still remains difficult?

Arc types to consider

Prompt	Your notes
Growth arc	The character moves towards greater honesty, courage, intimacy, self-knowledge, or moral clarity.
Disillusionment arc	The character sees reality more clearly, but that clarity may be painful rather than comforting.
Corruption arc	The character abandons restraint, empathy, or principle in pursuit of power, safety, revenge, or desire.
Resistance arc	The character does not fully transform, but the story reveals the cost of their refusal.

Detailed character worksheet

Prompt	Your notes
Public role	How is the character described by others?
Private truth	What would they hate being accurately seen for?
Deep desire	What would feel like relief, vindication, or home?
Main fear	What do they think will happen if they stop controlling the situation?
Blind spot	What do they misread about themselves or others?
Moral pressure point	What temptation or compromise will test them most?
Relational pattern	How do they tend to behave in friendship, love, family, work, or rivalry?
Body language under stress	What physical tells betray the truth?
Language pattern	Do they evade, overstate, intellectualise, joke, command, flatter?
Symbol or object	What object, ritual, place, or memory carries emotional charge for them?

Relationships as arc pressure

Characters do not change in isolation. Other people expose them, tempt them, shield them, misread them, and force choices. A strong arc workbook should therefore test relationship design, not only solo psychology.

Prompt	Your notes
Who sees through them?	Name the character most able to read beneath the mask.
Who rewards the flaw?	Name the character or system that benefits from them staying unchanged.
Who demands change?	Who pushes them towards truth, even indirectly?

Who mirrors them?	Which character reveals a version of what they may become?
Who receives the cost?	Who is harmed when the protagonist clings to the old pattern?

Example: relationship pressure

A protagonist who prides herself on self-sufficiency may seem admirable in isolation. Place her beside a younger brother whose safety depends on her asking for help, and the flaw becomes plot-active rather than abstract.

Questions that deepen an arc

- What does this character do that appears strong, but is actually defensive?
- What kind of love or recognition do they crave, but cannot easily receive?
- What truth about themselves would rearrange the whole story if admitted early?
- What choice would prove change more clearly than any speech?
- What remains difficult even after the ending, so the arc feels earned rather than tidy?

Scene-level arc tracking

Prompt	Your notes
Scene goal	What does the character want in this moment?
Arc pressure	How does the scene press on the flaw, fear, or false belief?
Behavioural evidence	What does the character say or do that reveals their current stage of change?
New crack or setback	Does the character move, relapse, hesitate, or rationalise?
Carry-forward effect	How does this scene alter future choices?

Expanded example, one protagonist across five beats

Prompt	Your notes
Opening	Ellen keeps everyone at a distance because she believes dependency invites humiliation.
Inciting event	Her mother's stroke forces her back to the family home she has carefully avoided.
Midpoint	She discovers her brother has carried the practical burden she once judged him incapable of handling.
Crisis	To secure proper care for her mother, Ellen must publicly admit she cannot manage everything alone.
Ending	She is not suddenly easy or confessional, but she asks for help before collapse, which is a genuine change.

Blank workbook pages

Prompt	Your notes
Character name	
Public role	
Private fear	
Protective strategy	
What they want	
What they need	
Midpoint recognition	
Ending proof of change	

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Public role	
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Final test

If you removed the plot and described only the character's inner journey, would there still be movement? If you removed the inner journey and described only the plot, would the story lose emotional voltage? Strong fiction needs both.