CHARACTERIZATION TECHNIQUES

Synecdoche. "Show everything but the character's face until the last second." Shows bits and pieces of the character that represent the synecdoche, or the essence of that character. For example, costume elements, props the character carries around, things the character has done, and other cues that uniquely represent the character. But do NOT show the character's face. Wait until the last possible moment to show the character's face.

Rose's intro
Jack Reacher's intro
Indiana Jones's intro
The Joker's intro
Mac's intro
Gatsby's intro
Iron Man's intro
Aragorn's intro (Strider)
Forrest Gump's intro
John Coffee's intro
Hannibal Lecter's intro

Save the Cat. "Make the character defend something defenseless." If you want to create an extremely likable hero that everyone will vehemently adore, make the character do something loving and sacrificial for the most defenseless character. The sacrifice can be tangible or could be putting oneself in danger. Lesser forms of this technique may include less sacrifice. The goal of the technique is to simply show one character defending or simply helping another character. The greater the risk assumed, the better. The greater the sacrifice, the better. The more defenseless "the cat" is, the better.

Alita saves the dog
Aladdin saves the kids
I am a Marine, Don I will beat the sh*t out of you
I volunteer as tribute
Peeta bread scene
Anyone can stand in front of a target.

Kill the Cat. "Make the character harm something defenseless." If you want to create an extremely unlikable villain that everyone will vehemently loathe, make the character do something horrifying to a defenseless character who least deserves it. Also use this technique to earn sympathy for an abused protagonist.

You are not leaving this tower, EVER
Oh, you won't need any ink.
Homelander's worst crime
Cal gets angry
Kill the mouse, then save the mouse
Spiderman 2

Reaction. "Just make the character react to a bunch of random stuff in a unique way." We learn about other people by seeing how they react to ordinary things. This information lets us accurately judge what they are like because we have many examples of ordinary reactions to normal things. When we see a character react to ordinary things in a non-ordinary way, this can reveal interesting character. It tells us exactly what would make this character unique in real life.

Wall-E and Eevah
Wall-E alone
Rapunzel and the crown
The aptitude test

Care for Insignificance. "Show the character taking great joy in something mundane." To make a character likable, just make the character get giddy over something normal people wouldn't be excited about. The more insignificant the item, the better. The more happy they become as a result, the better. The more unfair the character's circumstances are at the time, the better. Make a suffering character extremely happy over the smallest thing. This is in essence what it means to be likable as a person.

Alita and chocolate
I love it!
Wall-E's trinkets
I'm the king of the world!
The opera scene

Value Stacking. "This one is bad, that one is even badder, but you have no idea about the last one." This is when you layer multiple adjectives together with different examples to demonstrate levels of severity (could be positive or negative, but usually negative). This is usually associated with characterization, but doesn't necessarily have to be. While not always necessary, this technique is often accompanied by mystery concerning the final, most severe value. In other words, you often want to hide how bad the final one is to use the audience's imagination to make it even worse.

Nightfuries 1; Nightfuries 2
Hannibal Lecter
The mystery principle of value stacking; don't show your monster

Want vs. Need. "The character wants plot goals, but needs to fulfill story goals to get it." The character wants candy, but they need their vegetables first. The need, or the vegetables, is often associated with a core wound that prevents the character from being able to solve a deeper problem. This is what the "story" is about. The "want" is more about a tangible, external goal that they very clearly either do or do not achieve. This is what the "plot" is about. A logline can, but does not necessarily have to, indicate what the main character's want and need is. A possible logline format states something to the order of, "Character wants to [want],

but can't because [need]". For example, "Wall-E is lonely and wants to have companionship, but can't because the humans have to come back to Earth and clean up their own mess first."

Want vs. Need Reversal. "Opposing characters start with opposite want/need then trade by the end." This is a very advanced characterization technique. Character A starts off wanting eggs, but he needs to get money first. Character B starts off wanting money, but needing eggs first. By the end of the story, roles have flipped. Character B now wants eggs, but needs money while Character A now wants money but needs eggs.

In the example below, Wall-E starts off wanting companionship but he needs humans to return first. Eve starts off wanting humans to return but needing companionship first. Near the end, the roles have reversed. After his memory is wiped, Wall-E wants to do his job without any fuss but needs companionship first. Eve now wants companionship. This isn't a perfectly symmetrical reversal, but it illustrates the main point.

First state; Reversed state

Another known example of this technique is the want/need relationship between Iron Man and Captain America throughout the Avengers saga, particularly around Captain America: Civil War. Towards the end, their positions on theme reverse symmetrically.

Identity Reversal. "Rapidly change or destabilize the audience's perception of a character's identity." This technique can be found in anything from character introductions to plot twists to extremely complicated characters whose motivations are never known until the very end of a story. Paint a character as a clear archetype, then break that archetype in the right way at the right time. This can also look like mixing two very different archetypes together at the same time in a way that reveals much more interesting character. The greater the contrast between the competing archetypes, the better. The more rapid the reversal, the better. The more unexpected the reversal is, the better.

Willy Wonka entrance
That nobody is John Wick.
…what you shoulda did ten minutes ago
Luke, I am your father
I'm not here for you
Baby Driver
Snape's Memories
I think the bags was a nice idea, but not pointing any fingers…

DRAMATIC TENSION TECHNIQUES

Bomb Under the Table. "Does he know?" This is any time when the audience is given information extremely relevant to the characters in the scene, but one or more characters within the scene may not know, but they would most certainly want to know. The key here is creating a rapid transition from potential obliviousness to knowledge.

Hans Landa 1
Hans Landa 2
Hans Landa 3
"I didn't even know you were there!" from the Newsroom
Final Destination

Authority Reversal. "You thought you were in charge?" This is when one character or party is extremely confident that they are in control of a situation. Suddenly, they're not. Suddenly, another character is in complete and total control. This is different from a trap because the character losing control isn't necessarily being manipulated into doing any specific thing. The key of this technique is control, not getting another party to do something specific. This technique can certainly be mixed with The Trap though. The greater the contrast between starting and ending states, the better. The more rapid the reversal, the better.

Let me get this straight…
Let's rewind the clock.
Revenge on Darby
Do you have Jason Bourne in custody?
You embarrass me.
Iron Man 2 hearing
I'm in the middle of an interrogation right now.

The Trap. "They just played that character like a puppet." This is where you get one character or group of characters to trick another character or group of characters into doing something very specific. The party being tricked needs to think they are winning, but the audience usually knows they just walked straight into a trap. The more specific, the better. The more the victim's attitude changes after the trap is revealed (if it's revealed), the better.

If that were true, we would be having this conversation face to face
The Newsroom tea party states something about being of the people (paid)
Mission Impossible tricks
Outsmarting the FBI
Thank you for your cooperation

Certain Doom. "The Titanic will sink. It is a mathematical certainty." This is when you promise the audience that a very bad thing will most certainly definitely happen, and then the bad thing does in fact happen (usually). While suspense often comes from uncertainty, this technique weaponizes absolute certainty and takes the audience to a place where they feel powerless in empathy with the character(s). After employing this technique, add uncertainty by teasing not *what* will happen, but *how* it will happen.

The Titanic will sink.
We're asking for your permission to kill three men.
The Bear Jew
Eeny meeny miney moe

Forced Denial. "I'm completely unable to say what I'm actually thinking." The key of this technique is putting a character in a place where they cannot say something they very much want to say—for fear of tangible consequences. This is like subtext, but it's a more severe form of denial since they truly do want to say something more. The more they wish they could say it, the better. The more extreme the consequences for saying it, the better. The more terrible the consequences of not saying it, the better.

America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.
I didn't know Christopher well at all.
Get off my boat
Some of us have work to do.
Why do you shut the world out?

The Choice. "If I do this simple, physical thing, then…" The key of this technique is to provide a physical choice with immediate consequences. The more tangible the choice, the better. The clearer the consequences, the better. The more drastic the consequences, the better. Make the choice something that is an either this or that with no wishy-washy in-between options. The character either chooses this or they choose that.

Blue pill vs Red pill
If I pick up this phone, your plot is over.
Don't fly over the reactor
The Joker's social experiment
You really want me to shake your hand?
Faction ceremony

The Prediction. "First this will happen, then that will happen." Have the character make a crazy prediction about the future. Then make the prediction come true. The sooner the payoff, the better. The more specific the prediction, the better. The greater the contrast between how the scene starts off and how it ends, the better.

I'm gonna walk out of here.
And you're gonna be wearing these cuffs.
Actually it's 3 against 1.

The Hint. "Provide key information whose importance is not immediately realized by the audience." The key part of this technique is reusing old information for new purposes. This technique can be used to set up plot twists. It can also be used to keep the audience interested in and invested in key bits of information by revisiting them in completely different ways with brand new implications.

Why do you think your German counterpart has a girlfriend?
Hold on, you would never allow a non-compete clause
Did you get my message?

Mystery Box. "You'll never know." This is when the story refuses to provide key information. It does not have to be a literal box. It can be an ending that leaves an unanswered question or it can be a mask that is never taken off. It creates tension by activating the audience's imagination and curiosity.

Pulp fiction suitcase
What's in the box?
V's mask
Inception's ending
What was the rest of the message?

THEME TECHNIQUES

Setup/Payoff. "Don't forget to fire Chekov's gun." If you place a key story element into a story that hasn't actually done anything yet, it should do something before the story ends. Don't set something up but forget to follow through.

Lifting Thor's hammer; Payoff
High frequency generator receiver; Payoff
You wouldn't say anything to me, nor me to you; Payoff

Misdirect/Metaphor. "Make a character interrupt a long conversation with a bizarre story that seems completely irrelevant." This technique keeps the audience interested in longer, slower scenes. It can also diffuse tension. By the end of the bizarre story, its metaphorical purpose should become crystal clear.

Moses and Jesus are playing golf
Landa's rat speech

Motif. "How to create extraordinary meaning out of the utterly innocuous." The motif technique creates and then manipulates patterns to imply something important has changed. A motif is established to represent the status quo. Later, when the status quo changes as a result of the story happening, we revisit the same exact motif, but the motif now has a completely different meaning. Sometimes the motif is a specific line that is repeated, sometimes it is a specific action or sound effect that is repeated. The purpose of the motif is to demonstrate that some type of meaningful change has occurred. That is its core function. In photography, a motif might be as simple as a repeating visual element. In story however, the motif is there to communicate change through symbolism.

Establish motif; use motif to create new meaning
Establish motif; now use the motif to demonstrate that change has taken place
Establish motif; now use the motif to demonstrate that change has taken place
Up's opening sequence
Walking Her Home song

Thematic Question. "Theme is about sides on an issue." Theme is not a topic but a question. Topics do not invite conflict, opposing answers to questions do. The primary fuel of plot is thematic conflict. Create thematic conflict by setting up characters that answer a central thematic question in different, opposing ways. Only one viewpoint should endure to the end. Explore different ways of answering that exact thematic question in every single scene.

First line: What is the cost of lies?; Random Scene; Last line: What is the cost of lies?
Can good be found in the worst places?
Do vigilantes need supervision?
Can a good news show be popular?
Can you repeat the past?
Is human nature a weakness or strength?

Thematic Juxtaposition. "Show opposing thematic extremes as close together as possible." Juxtapose the idea that represents one party starkly against the idea that represents the other party. This is more simple than the thematic question technique, being less about answers to a question, and more about illustrating the differences visually. The greater the contrast, the better. The closer they are together in the sequence, the better.

Titanic class dichotomy
Now you look like the Minister of Coal
The Joker interrogation
For the First Time in Forever

Story Within a Story. "Have a character tell a story." For some reason, this makes stories seem more interesting. This can either be a brief story only told in dialogue, it can be a montage, or it can be a layer within a larger narrative.

Some men just want to watch the world burn.
Good Will Hunting
Our story begins with an up and coming politician…
The Newsroom The 112th Congress—the entire episode

Subversion of Expectations. Just watch Knives Out.

PACING COMPONENTS

Problem to Solve. "Just have the characters work together to solve a difficult problem." The difficulty of the problem must match the amount of time the story spends solving the problem.

Please state the nature of the problem.
You are being deported.
Where are your sisters?

Setback (Raising Stakes). "Just make the problem more difficult at every turn." This often happens right after a victory and can be a version of Bad News in the Good News/Bad News technique.

The Immigration office
Thanos arrives
Car argument

Graphic Illustration. "Give the audience something to think about if you don't expect them to pay attention to what's actually being said." A writer should always know what the audience should be thinking at each point in a narrative. This technique can be used in performed narratives to keep the audience interested in an illustration in their mind's eye if the current dialogue is boring or generally unfollowable. In this clip, the audience is not expected to follow what Will is saying, so the writer provides the Graphic Illustration of the Pentagon being levitated. Now the audience is focusing on the imaginary image of the Pentagon levitating instead of getting bored by the unfollowable rant.

Unfollowable rant
The music, has, stopped.

Withheld Revelation. "Withhold key information from either everyone, a specific character, or the audience to change the framing of an event after the event ends." In the linked scene, the entire framing of the scene changes at the very end when we learn that Charlie engineered the entire thing from the start.

You faxed him the polling data, didn't you?

Ticking Clock. "This is the reason we can't just stop, calm down, and come back to this problem next week." This can be as simple as just being a reason the action needs to happen now, not later, or it can be an actual reference to time. It can also be a literal ticking clock.

Whatever you're about to say, save it for another 10 seconds
Literal ticking clock
Literal ticking clock

Good News/Bad News. "Great victories come at great cost." Any time the protagonist wins a victory, whether large or small, they must lose something. There must be a catch. There can be no victories that don't come at a cost. Show the audience that cost.

And that's the point. You're gonna have to choose.
Are you satisfied with your care?
What have you DONE?
His name is Nemo.
Hiccup's leg

Forward. "Don't ever end a scene until it causes the next one to happen." Every scene within a narrative—linear or nonlinear—needs to have a causal relationship with the scene that comes after. If one were to analyze a script backwards to forward scene by scene, they should find a clear through line of cause and effect that reaches all the way through the narrative the beginning without breaking. In non-linear storytelling, this causal relationship can become less direct but should still be clear.

He leaves a calling card.

THE MOST IMPORTANT READING QUESTIONS!

These are the first questions going through the minds of most people reading scripts. The answers to all these questions should be yes.

Even if it's an epic, grand story, is it actually about a small social relationship? The Great Gatsby

Did it make me care? Frozen's opening

Did it grab my attention? "Pack as many techniques into your opening as you possibly can." – Free Guy opening. The Free Guy opening uses the following techniques:

1. Thematic Juxtaposition
2. Want vs. Need (the need isn't terribly clear yet)
3. Reaction
4. Care for Insignificance
5. Some use of Synecdoche
6. Problem to Solve
7. Begins to establish the Thematic Question

Did it surprise me? Knives Out entire film

Did it keep me interested? Random scene from The Newsroom. It uses the following techniques to make an interesting and engaging scene out of something that should have been extremely boring:

1. Story Within a Story (this entire episode uses Story Within a Story layering)
2. Graphic Illustration
3. Withheld Revelation/ The Trap
4. Bomb Under the Table
5. Forward

Did it leave me feeling something? The Notebook's ending

Were at least most scenes about the central thematic question? HBO's entire Chernobyl mini-series, just about every single scene.

FOR PRACTICE

Write a 5-6 minute scene that uses The Trap and Authority Reversal at the same time. Use the following planner to organize your story components before trying. If the first script you write doesn't seem like it's working, that's okay. Its normal. Throw it out and start over tomorrow after a good night's sleep. Sometimes it takes several tries to get it to work.

Protagonist Intention: _____

Protagonist Obstacle: _____

Antagonist Intention: _____

Antagonist Obstacle:_____

Protagonist's Starting Emotional State: _____

Antagonist's Starting Emotional State: _____

Protagonist's Ending Emotional State: _____

Antagonist's Ending Emotional State: _____

Protagonist will Demonstrate Authority By: _____

Antagonist will Demonstrate Authority By:_____

Authority Will Reverse When: _____

Forward: _____

STORY BEATS

There are 19,394,555,032 different versions of this out there. Some are extremely specific, others are far more broad. Some specify page numbers, others only specify order. This version seeks to find a happy medium between the problematically specific and problematically vague.

Every individual full-length scene or sequence should ideally contain most if not all of these beats.

There are ways of writing highly successful narratives that substantially deviate from this formula (Knives Out for example), but doing so is exorbitantly difficult. Beginners and experts alike are universally advised to stick with the conventional story beat structure.

This applies to most narrative forms of storytelling such as feature films, short films, musicals, stage plays, novels, radio plays, etc.

1. Exposition. This can be super short. Just needs to establish the characters in their status quo. Ground the audience in who is who and what their relationship identities are. Try to limit the number of new proper nouns you introduce. Introduce your main character as soon as possible. This is where you start establishing thematic juxtaposition, the thematic question, character synecdoche, and motifs. Also establish how long this status quo has been going on.

2. Inciting Incident. This is the thing that suddenly happens that creates a massive problem that is so big that it needs the entire script's length to solve the problem.

3. The Call. The main character needs to find out what they need to do to start solving the problem.

4. Rejection of the Call. The main character needs to realize that the solution may be a lot more difficult than expected and they need to at the very least hesitate before proceeding. Usually, they turn back.

5. Acceptance of the Call. The main character then proceeds forward with the call.

6. Point of no Return. The main character then proceeds past a point where they cannot turn back even if they wanted to.

7. Battle 1=>Pre-climax=>Revelation. This is kind of like the first chorus in a song. There will be three of these, just like in most songs. It doesn't need to be a literal battle, but it can be. There needs to be a primary conflict scene where the main character clearly wins or loses. It needs a small climax. At the end, we need to discover an important revelation that will change and Forward the next scene.

8. Midpoint Revolution. Roughly around the exact center of the script, typically in the middle of the 2nd act in a 3-act structure (or the act break in a 2-act structure more typical in theatre), something drastic needs to change. The primary external goal must shift.

9. All Hope is Lost 1. Shortly after the Midpoint Revolution, we need to see that the new plan definitely will most certainly not work. We need to dash all that hope. This is the first of 2 "All hope is lost" moments.

10. Battle 2=>Pre-climax=>Revelation. This is the second chorus of the song, the second version of the first battle. Like the original, this must end with a key revelation that sets the next sequence in motion. The main character needs to clearly lose this one as well, but it should be a more fair fight this time.

11. All Hope is Lost 2. We now need to dash all that hope again. This is the main character's lowest moment.

12. Battle 3=>Climax=>Not Good Enough. Then, we sing the most energetic chorus. In this battle, the main character technically wins, but not quite. There is still something important to resolve.

13. Resolving Climax or Forward. The final problem is then resolved. If there is more to follow, we must use a Forward to propel into the next scene/episode/film/play/story to keep the chain of dominoes going.

FURTHER RESOURCES

[Thematic Question Technique](#)
[Save the Cat/Care for Insignificance](#)
[Subversion of Expectations](#)
[Make Me Care](#)
[Ticking Clock/Good News and Bad News/Raising Stakes](#)
[Bomb Under the Table](#)
[Synecdoche Principle of Characterization](#)
[Awesome Stuff in General](#)

KEY SOURCES

"Filmento" YouTube channel
"The Closer Look" YouTube channel
"Film Courage" YouTube channel