

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CHARACTER

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If you've taken Robert McKee's story seminar, you've heard him say that you need to know the world of your story as well as God knows this one. Syd Field gives writing assignments in which you are asked to list every last detail of everything that ever happened to your character. I've seen screenwriting workbooks where you are made to fill in hundreds of details like what kind of tooth paste does she use and what type of underwear does he wear.

There is another school of thought that you don't need all these details to create a terrific character, because your character is not a person, he's a SKETCH of a person. As you might have guessed from my tone, I'm a proponent of this approach. In fact, I have found from experience, that sitting there making lists upon lists sucks the life out of your poor hapless character.

Recently, an executive at Oxygen Network told me that they loved my script because my characters pop off the page. You can be sure that I never sat down and figured out what type of undies my characters wear or what type of toothpaste they use. Although, come to think of it, if you asked me, I could answer that right off the bat because I know my characters.

I've figured out to get to know my characters by using what writers do best: writing.

I often improvise scenes in which I play myself, and I interview my character and ask them questions. These scenes are quick and easy to write. I know that the scene won't end up in the script (I'm in it, after all) so I'm free to be playful, go wild, and not worry about how it "comes out."

It's best to improvise scenes long-hand (no computer) without using screenplay format, so you can write quickly.

Improvise a conversation, in writing, in which you interview your main character. Your character will respond in any way that is natural to him or her while you will play yourself. He may cooperate and answer dutifully, he may resist answering, he may make fun of you, belittle you, encourage you, he may tell you that you'll never finish this script or thank you for writing him so well. Let him be himself as he answers your questions. If you're not getting your answers, you may need to outsmart your character and trick him. I once asked one of my characters what she's afraid and she, being way too cool and guarded, refused to answer. Finally, I told her what she was afraid of and she went ballistic on me. The truth hurts...

If you're still not getting answers out of your characters, bring in a supporting character into the scene and ask these questions of that other character. "Frank, help me out here. Why is Sally so unhappy with the story?"

Some questions you could ask your character are:

-What was good about your childhood?

-What was the hardest thing about your childhood?

-What do you most want in life?

-What do you most fear in life?

There are hundreds of other questions you can ask. Or you can be bold and let your character interview you. The variations are endless.

I once acted as a marriage counselor between two characters.

-Kerry, what do you love about Emmett?

-What do you hate about him?

-Emmett, what do you love about Kerry?

-What do you hate about her?

Invariably, your character will be based on someone you know. I encourage that. They won't be that person, and in the end, may not resemble the person at all. But by basing a character on at least some elements of a person you know, you won't find yourself with a painfully blank page. Even real people are born from the DNA of two people who came before them. Your character's parents are you, and the person you're basing him on. Sometimes writers form a character for a particular actor. That too will get you started pretty well. I have a character that I wrote for Morgan Freeman. I just named him Morgan. Why hide it. Of course, it doesn't mean that this actor will play the part. "Sister Act" was written for Bette Midler. Whoopie Goldberg ended up playing the lead. What the heck. Basing the character on a real person is just a trick to get your started so you're not making something out of nothing.

Lastly, in your improvised conversations, you can also use your character to guide you in figuring out your story:

E: Harriett, why is the script so slow here? What's wrong with this picture?

H: You're just being hard on yourself. Skip this part and move on. Write Act III and then come back here.

Oh and by the way, are you sure my daughter is not a son? That would make his quilting skills more interesting, less predictable.

E: You don't like the name Harriett, do you.

H: Where did that come from? Talk about random conversations... Listen, you'll change my name later. Quit fretting over the details, it's driving me crazy. Can we get to the shootout already?!

I was once working on a buddy script with three characters. As I was improvising conversations with them to figure out some plot issues, they insisted that I stay out of the conversation and discuss the matter between themselves. Now that's what I call knowing your characters. Eventually, you will want to stay out of the way and let your character do the writing. Until then, keep writing contrived dialogue, cover some ground, and eventually a character will hatch. Just don't sit there making lists about what type of cereal he ate in the third grade.

Now enough reading my articles. Take out a pen and paper, set an egg timer for ten minutes, and write a conversation with your character without lifting the pen till the timer goes off. Have fun with this. Write badly. If all you do this week is ten minutes of interviews a day, by the end of the week you'll know much more about your story than you do now.

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