



Module 6 : How to Build a Good Children's Book Character

- Why creating good characters is important
- How to get ideas for characters
- How characters will differ depending on your target age range
- The qualities a character needs to be real and engaging

In this chapter we will cover the following topics in detail:

- Why creating good characters is important
- How to get ideas for characters
- How characters will differ depending on your target age range
- The qualities a character needs to be real and engaging
- How to develop your character ideas
- How to write about your characters in a way that makes them real for your readers.

6.1 Introduction



Your characters are one of the most important elements of your book.

They are the pillars that hold up your plot and the framework for your setting. Events will seem hollow if the participants in your literary world are two dimensional; each character should be fully formed enough that they could be a real person.

Authors and critics sometimes describe literature as 'character driven'. This is where the character has been created first and the plot follows on as a consequence of their needs and desires, and the conflicts they encounter along the way. Some stories claim to be 'plot driven', which is where the structure of the story has been created first, with characters created afterwards to fit into this framework.

In reality, character and plot are intertwined; imagine if Harry Potter had been a nasty, selfish boy who did not care if Voldemort came back to power - the plot would have disintegrated. Now imagine that the plot had determined that his parents had not been killed by Voldemort in the first place - his character would be quite different.

In this way you can see that plot and character are ultimately inseparable.

If you already have an idea for a character or two, develop them first and create the plot from there. If you already have a plot in mind, chances are you have some sense of characters within this, so expand on the seed of that idea. Either way, great characters are an absolute requirement for a great book, so let's get started.

6.2 Getting Ideas

For many budding authors the first hurdle to overcome when building good characters is getting the ideas for them in the first place.

Although this can feel challenging for some there are many ways you can get inspired.

1. Read, read and read some more

Yes, I know we have covered this already, but it is really that important! This is not permission to copy characters from other books; rather, use existing literature, the good and the not-so-good, to analyse characters that work well or not. What is it about them that makes them interesting? Get the

opinions of children you know.

2. People watch

This is a pastime that many writers have anyway, and if you do not already, give it a try.

Sit in a café, on a park bench, on the bus (the setting is not important), and simply observe the people as they pass by; their conversations, action, interactions, appearance, clothing, expressions and speech.

Is there something about someone that draws you to them? What is it? How do they interact with the people around them? What can you deduce about their life and personality from their appearance and behaviour? How might they appear to children? Are they a child themselves?

Go home and write something about one of these people; it could be a short story, a character sketch, a conversation with someone, a piece of description, or an imagining of them in a fantastical scene. How do you think they might act if they had to fight a dragon? Or fly to the moon? Give your imagination free rein and use different aspects of different people to create new characters. Have fun with the endless possibilities that writing fiction presents us with.

3. Use the resources around you

Scan the Internet, the newspapers, magazines, billboard posters, advertisements, the television; use images, stories and conversations to inspire you. Take aspects of different physical characteristics or personal events to patch together a new character. Write down anything that stands out to you, on a pad or computer file for this purpose, and come back to the idea later.

4. Consider the people close to you

The people you know the best are often the source of the richest inspiration for characters. It is usually not a good idea to take someone's physical appearance and personality and transpose it directly into your book, though it has been done. Instead, think about your family and friends, their habit, quirks and traits, to understand what about them makes them individual and interesting.

5. Use yourself

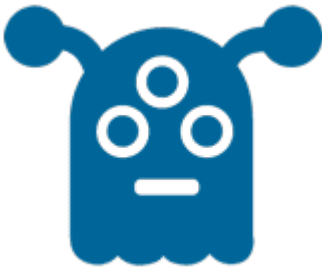
When it comes to being really honest about emotions and thoughts, your own mind is the best place to look. It may feel exposing to do this, but your own fears, desires and motivations are often shared by others and are a good way to make your characters relatable.

6. Interact with children

Although your own adult characteristics and memories of childhood feelings are valuable, if you use only these for fleshing out your protagonist and other children in the story, it may be somewhat limited and dated (depending on your age, of course). You need to interact with children of the age that you are writing for and the age of your protagonist too, if they are more than a year apart. Depending on this age range, there are a number of things you can do to achieve this.

It is not a good idea to be too persistent about frequenting the places that children hang out, just watching and making notes; you do not want to give people the wrong idea. Instead, volunteer at the local nursery, youth group, swimming club, library, or school; look around your area to find what is suitable and appropriate. It is best to be honest about your motives, but chances are, you probably quite like children anyway if you are planning to write for them, so this should come across when you ask to volunteer. Do not forget the friends of your children if you have them, or the children of friends, or extended family.

6.3 Differing Characters for Different Age Groups



At this point it might be helpful to discuss how your characters will differ depending on the target age of your book.

You have to keep in mind that what is suitable for a 14 year old will not be for a 4 year old and vice versa. If you are writing a picture book for 3 to 5 year olds, your characters will need to be portrayed simplistically.

Do not underestimate your readership; children are often more perceptive than we give them credit for, although not always able to express it, and over simplifying things will make them lose interest.

It is up to you how dark and scary you want to make your villain, if you have one, but keep in mind that it is the guardians who will be choosing the books, and they may take a poor view of evil characters like those found in Grimm's fairy tales.

Even if you are writing for the youngest readership, your characters still need to be fully formed individuals.

Don't shirk on giving them a backstory (though it may be short if they are only 4), even though you may not mention any of the material in your limited word count. Your character still needs to have past experiences, idiosyncrasies, opinions and flaws, or the action and speech that they do perform will seem wooden.

You will need to make sure that you are up to speed with the fads, trends, speech, and technology of your target age range too. Do this by going online and researching the sorts of things that they participate in, buy, read, and discuss.

6.4 The Qualities That Characters Need to be Real and Engaging

These are the traits that will make the readers want to care about your characters. It is not a hard and fast rule that each will need every one of these, but it is a good place to start.

1. A desire

Each character will usually have some motivating aspect of their life which pushes them forward in the story. It is not always overt, but is always underpinning the decisions they make.

2. A weakness or secret

This is usually a flaw, shortcoming, or matter of shame that the character possesses in the long or short term.

3. A contradiction or surprise

Characters that always fulfil our expectation can be boring. Readers like to be surprised by a character's actions now and again.

4. A vulnerability

This one is crucial, as to be human is to be vulnerable, one way or another (and this stands for animal characters too). If your character is perfect, unassailable and invulnerable, not only are they not human, they are also not relatable.

6.5 How to Develop Your Character Ideas



Once you have the inkling of an idea for a character, which may be no more than the fact that they like going to aquariums and eating pizza in bed, you will need to feed the idea until you have a fully fleshed personality and physical formation that could walk right out of the page.

The key to this is not to force it; if you try to speed up the process of character formation you might end up forcing traits that are not in keeping with your original sense of the person. Sometimes this works and you will improve them, but other times you lose that feeling of excitement you had when you came up with them; if this happens, backtrack and recapture the essence of the character before moving forwards again.

How each author develops their characters is a very individual process that differs from one to the next.

The approaches can be divided roughly in two - those who plan in advance and those who do not. Needless to say, the differences can be measured on a sliding scale and you may end up sitting somewhere between the two.

1. Letting the character evolve

Some would say that this technique is reserved for experienced novelists, but there are no concrete rules here, so if this appeals to you, give it a try. The idea is that you go ahead and write your first draft without planning extensively first. You think about your characters and plot in advance, obviously, but do not formally create character outlines. You let the character evolve organically as you write. By the end of your first draft you may then realise that what you have written will need a lot of revision and maybe even a complete rewrite. Despite this, some authors find that they like to discover about their characters while they write and go back to achieve consistency and growth, rather than enforcing a set of traits before the character has taken part in any action.

2. Planning in advance

A larger proportion of authors will choose to create character descriptions before they start to write the main text of the book. These will not appear anywhere in the book but will serve as a means to explore the depths of the personality of the character and as a way of ensuring that their actions and reactions are consistent throughout. The level of detail required here depends on your preference, as well as the significance of the role of each character. Minor roles may need only one side of A4,

for example, and fleeting appearance of strangers only half a page, where your main characters may inspire 20 sheets of A4 each.

Here are some ideas of what you might include in your character studies:

- Name, date of birth, address
- Profession, or school
- Family, and their relationships with each of them
- Friends
- Childhood (or earlier childhood if they are young)
- Fears
- Hopes
- Physical appearance
- Defining physical habits, such as blinking often, or humming to themselves
- What brought them to this point in the story
- Hobbies
- Likes and dislikes
- Transcript of you interviewing them
- Their reaction to certain situations, mundane or fantastical

6.6 How to Make Them Real Through Your Writing



Once you have a fairly firm idea of the personality, history and appearance of your characters, you need to think about how to bring them alive in your book.

You have started to do this with your character studies, but when they are actually taking part in the action of the storyline you will not be presenting them in this way.

In fact, as we mentioned earlier, you need to show, not tell. You should not have to dump great big passages of description into the narrative in order for the reader to get to know your characters. Instead, think hard about how your character would speak. Give them a voice that is individual and distinct when they take part in dialogue. Do they have any quirks or little habits that would make them seem more human? These are called character tags and should not be used too often, or your writing will seem forced and unnatural. How would their past experiences and mind set influence their actions and reactions? Use these times as an opportunity for your readers to get to know them, revealing a bit more about them with every page that they participate in.

Assignment

Character Development

Time: 45-60 minutes

This task will get you to think about developing characters for your book, looking at many aspects from their personalities through to how they affect the plot.

Download the worksheet below and print out three times and complete.

[Download Worksheet](#)

Module Summary

You can include some description, explanation and backstory, of course, but readers, and especially younger readers whose attention spans are unforgiving of verbose authors, will not tolerate large chunks of description.

Allow your character to be revealed, bit by bit, as the story moves on - for you as the writer and for the reader too - that is part of the suspense and the fun of your interaction with each other.

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