

Writing a Believable Character

Let's Begin with Your Villain



I'm visual, so I like to kick-start my writing by conveying to the reader the picture I have in my mind and provide detail about his or her physical characteristics. Next, you might have met such a villain, and know him or her quite well. Think about this individual's attributes, and a theme will emerge. This will assure consistency in your writing.

Is s/he self-absorbed?

I've met several people who pretend to be friendly. Upon closer inspection, however, I witness the truth. For example, if the topic of conversation is not about herself or himself, there's no conversation at all. I know someone who drones on and on during holiday gatherings at the table of relatives about her friends, none of whom anyone at the table know or will ever meet. Yet, she drones on for an hour, never asking anyone in the room how their lives are going. Why? Because it is always about her. Adding small details like this in your character development that include mannerisms, mundane chatter, and examples will ignite your reader's imaginations and they'll fill in the blanks on their own because they know someone similar.

Greedy?

Been stiffed by someone you placed your trust in? Or perhaps you personally know of someone who has. There are countless stories and movies that provide details about how trust is betrayed. It's heart-wrenching, so add this to your protagonist's experience. In my upcoming book, *Fatal Funds*, three women entrusted their life savings to a rogue financial planner. They trusted him, they were naive, and he exploited that trust. In my novel the planner is not only greedy, but incompetent. Adopt the habit of either eavesdropping or interviewing. I'm finding my chapters somewhat easy to write, because the events are true. It's all on the Internet. You'll find many people who are eager to tell their stories. Think about how greed manifests itself. And, yes, greed is a deadly sin. Your villain may be too pushy, insensitive, or imply there's a sense of urgency to purchase what s/he is selling. I had a bizarre encounter once with an real financial planner who called *me* greedy because I wouldn't agree with him. Nice try, I told him. I'm the least greedy person I know, and I

knew then and there that he was manipulating me in addition to being disrespectful to me. The upside now, is that I can use his behavior to load my book with countless examples.

Secretive?



I love to weave secrets into my plots. Everyone thinks their secrets are safe, but every writer must acknowledge the distinct possibility that if two people know something damaging, it is no longer a secret. The question is: when and how does the writer introduce the secret and when is it exposed? I have so many secrets woven into my novel, *Fatal Funds*, that it's hard to remember who knows what and when, and that's what makes the writing fun work.

Back-stabbing?

Writers need only to refer to personal recollections to comprehend and write about a back-stabbing incident from their own pasts. Likely, everyone has a painful high school memory where the 'knife-in-the-back' scenario is still a challenge to forget. Write about it. Workplace stories abound. Co-workers who lie, cheat, steal, if s/he believes it will get them a promotion or raise. Remember these thieves are duplicitous, so, while perpetrating their dirty deed, they are also employing a self-aggrandizing strategy with others to show how genuine and accomplished they are. Living or working with this type of individual is a land mine, but also great writing material and often can assist in dealing with writer's block.

Dishonest?

Dishonesty is ubiquitous, meaning anywhere, anytime, and with anyone, dishonesty will rear its ugly head. For writer's it's a matter of severity and what's at stake. Think ethics here. I had a (ex)friend who was a well-known lobbyist. She played to my good nature, and got me assigned to a State Board so I could deliberate with other board members on professional licensees accused of ethical violations, which was an area of expertise for me. I was appointed by the Governor of the state for a 3-year term. I didn't find out until later that this so-called friend of mine had a hidden agenda. She expected me to be the mole, of sorts, requesting that I participate in hearings for the express purpose of always voting in favor of the accused licensee. You can't make this stuff up, right? At the minimum, this would have jeopardized my own professional license. When I told her I had no intention

of being her puppet and that her demand was wholly dishonest, she said she didn't care. Good-bye, old friend.

Do you sometimes ask yourself whether or not this person has a soul?

Over time, there are those people who show themselves to be missing a soul. If this person's soul is 'black', no conscience, and has no capacity for empathy, this is a perfect opportunity to employ the show vs. tell technique. How do the other characters in your story slowly figure out the dark side of the villain? How do they address him or her?



I am committed to showcasing fellow writers, and it is within this spirit that I offer a few aids to developing the personalities of your characters:

Consider a brief review of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator:

This tool has been popularized for use in work settings. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator personality test is an assessment formulated with extensive research, essentially dividing people into 16 types with four different variables on a spectrum.

According to the test, sensing types are thought to learn best by learning about the material in a detailed, logical manner, while intuitive types may prefer learning through insight, pattern recognition, and associations. Thinking types often desire to learn about objective truth and use logic and deductive reasoning, and feeling types often consider people's motives and personalize issues and causes. Lastly, judging types tend to have a structured approach to the world, while perceiving types tend to be more open to change. Although the Myers-Briggs has come under scrutiny and disagreement, the tool will serve writers well in creating more in-depth characters.

Need a character with a personality disorder? Then you'll want to sound authentic when you write about your character. Let's begin with the official definition of a personality disorder according to the American Psychological Association:

General diagnostic criteria for a personality disorder:

- a) An enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, and must be manifested in two (or more) of

- the following areas: 1) Cognition, 2) Affectivity, 3) Interpersonal functioning, 4) Impulse control.
- b) The enduring pattern is inflexible and pervasive across a broad range of personal and social situations.
 - c) The enduring pattern leads to clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
 - d) The pattern is stable and of long duration, and its onset can be traced back to at least to adolescence or early adulthood.
 - e) The enduring pattern is not better accounted for as a manifestation or consequence of another mental disorder.
 - f) The enduring pattern is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance or a general medical condition (such as head trauma).

Do you need a good imagination to be a writer?

I often participate in an in-person writers support group near my home. Recently, a young woman posited this question to the entire group: Do I have to have a good imagination in order to write? The group unanimously said “NO.” The above examples make the case for not having to make everything up. Real life, over and over again, provides all of the necessary material and events and I doubt anyone could ever make up the juicy stuff that happens in real life.

Cheers to your next short story, novella, or novel. I wish you great success in creating your dastardly villain’s machinations. I hope I’ve given you a few new nuggets to chew on as you build a compelling villain while also building ego strength in the protagonist who faces him/her.

