

# Holly Lisle's

## Create A Character Clinic



NONFICTION

A Step-by-Step Course for the  
Fiction Writer

Holly Lisle's  
Create  
A Character  
Clinic

A Step-By-Step Course  
for the Fiction Writer

## Create A Character Clinic



OneMoreWord

Contact at: [onemoreword@hollylisle.com](mailto:onemoreword@hollylisle.com)

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And finally, thank you, for taking a chance on a book presented in this still-unusual manner. I hope to make it worth your time.

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## INTRODUCTION

My objective in writing this book is simple. I want to show you, not just how to develop a character, but how to write your characters in a compelling fashion once you come up with them. There are all sorts of books that will tell you how to put together interesting characteristics, with character backstory, with powerful motivations, and all the other things well-written characters need.

I have yet to find one, however, that takes the characteristics you've come up with and shows you how to apply them in such a way that your character lives and breathes on the page.

That's what I intend to do.

I want to make this process simple and to break it down into steps and techniques you can start following immediately. I'll show you what I do, and then take you through doing it yourself.

And I want to keep it short—you shouldn't have to wade through tons of words to find the few kernels of useful knowledge that you can start applying to your own work.

So that you can start using it right away, this book is divided into three sections.

- Section One is **Ask Them Anything**—Explanations and demonstrations of seven critical areas of character development, along with printable charts offering questions that will give you a well-rounded framework for your characters. Answer as few or as many questions as you need to get a feel for the people you'll be writing about, and ask (and answer) more as you work through your story and need new twists and turns.

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- Section Two is **Bring Them To Life**—A tutorial on how to put all the information you’ve developed into creating people who live on the page.
- Section Three is **The Sins of Characterization (And How to Commit Them Right)**—Believe it or not, almost everything you can ever do wrong in putting characters on the page, you can also do right. This section shows you when a sin can be a virtue, and vice-versa.

All three sections include demonstrations of both unpublishable and publishable approaches to techniques and problems, and exercises that allow you to put what you’ve learned into practice.

I want to make this as close as I can to me reading over your shoulder, looking at what you’ve done, and saying, “Okay. Here’s what you can try next to get that scene to work.”

With that in mind, I recommend you work through this book from front to back. Answer some Section One questions, even if only a few; do a handful of Section Two exercises just to learn how to extract interesting story from your Q&A; and then get into the sins and virtues and begin to practice them.

Mine aren’t the only techniques out there—in fact, I don’t know of anyone else who works the way I do, and you will find that a lot of advice elsewhere that contradicts mine. That’s okay—not every technique will work for every writer. Pick out what helps you, and feel free to discard the rest.

Good luck with your writing. I hope I can help you realize your dreams.



## **A BRIEF NOTE ON GENDER CONVENTIONS**

While I can assume that the readers of this book are human, and therefore most likely either male or female, I cannot begin to assume the same thing about the characters you hope to create.

And since I can think of few things more tedious to write (or read) than endless iterations of he/she/it put on the page in the hopes of being inclusive/inoffensive/politically correct, I'm going to fall back on old convention.

In this book, I'm **me**. You're **you**. The character in general will be **he**. His friends will be **he**, his enemies will be **he**, and his lovers will be **she**. I'll demo exercises with a female character. This setup does not encompass any sort of real-world diversity, nor is it intended to. You will use this info to write the characters **you** choose to write, and they will be exactly as diverse as you care to make them.

Meanwhile, I will not end up with a headache from writing sentences that read "You'll find your character's essential him-ness/her-ness/it-ness in his/her/its actions and relationships, and in his/her/its hobbies, challenges, friends and enemies." I won't commit a crime of a sentence like that, much less a whole book full of them, and I hope you'll forgive me for not doing so.

## **SECTION ONE: ASK THEM ANYTHING**

### **Character & What It Isn't**

My first character—at least the first one I actually remember writing with an eye toward selling the story he was in—was Draegan Dankmire. Feel free to snicker. I do.

I remember two things about poor Draegan, and the **other** thing was the fact that he had a hat like those worn by the Three Musketeers. Except it was purple.

Draegan was supposed to be a serious character in a serious fantasy novel. He was planned as the hero. He made it thirty pages, more or less, before he turned into a puddle of mush in the middle of the page and I realized the story wasn't going to work.

Now, not everything about that first failed novel effort was a total loss. The world that Draegan Dankmire inhabited showed up in **Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**, as Cadence Drake's home world. It was, if I say so myself, a damned cool world. But Draegan never made it to the land of published—or even finished—fiction, because a character cannot make it through the world with nothing going for him but an unfortunate name and a pimp hat.

He needs to have character.

Here are all the things that character isn't. It isn't a catch phrase said at stressful moments in the story. It isn't an interesting scar, or a habit of twisting hair around a finger, or a propensity to dress in yellow.

**Character** in your fictional character is precisely the same thing that it is in you. It's who you are when no one is looking, and who you are when someone is looking, and how those two people are different, and why.

Do you need to have a story already in mind to use this book? No. If you do, you can use the techniques and points given here to strengthen your work. If you don't, the act of creating characters will spawn more stories than you could write in a lifetime.

With that in mind, then, onward.

## **What Character Is, and How to Get Some**

People start out untried, untested, and essentially unformed. When we're small, we have basic needs. Feed us, love us, and keep us safe, and we're happy.

- **Character does not form in the moments when we're happy. Character forms when things start to go wrong.**

**Character** is how we deal with hardship, how we react when challenged, how we think when tempted, how we flee when hunted, how we pursue when hunting. It is how we want what we want, and what we are willing to do to get it.

All of us have moments in our pasts when we failed a challenge, when our choices reflected poorly on our characters. All of us have moments when we prevailed against a temptation, and came away looking good, and feeling good about ourselves, and deservedly so.

**Every fictional character should have those same moments;** places where he was weak or dishonest, places where he was strong and did the right thing in spite of personal cost or the temptation of personal gain. And—here's the tricky part—both your good guys and your bad guys have to have these same moments. We can safely assume that your villains (or antagonists) have made more wrong choices than right ones, have acted out of self interest far more often than altruism. Odds are good that your heroes (or protagonists) will have done the opposite.

- **If you want your characters to be fully fleshed-out human beings, you will not make them perfect.**

The sins you've committed will work well for your characters—amplified or lessened to suit your needs and your characters' places in your story, and disguised more or less depending upon how much of yourself you want to inject into your story.

How do you find out who your characters are?

*Holly Lisle*

I ask questions. I've found in my own writing that one good question is worth a hundred answers, and that just a handful of questions will give me a good feel for the character I'm writing.

I've also discovered—and this can save you a lot of time and frustration—that I don't need to know everything about my character before I start. In fact, I generally know very little. By not overworking the character's background before I get into the writing, I leave the door open for surprises.

I do, however, know enough to get me from one chapter to the next. Here's where I start.

# **SEVEN CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF CHARACTER**

## **Why Maslow Matters**

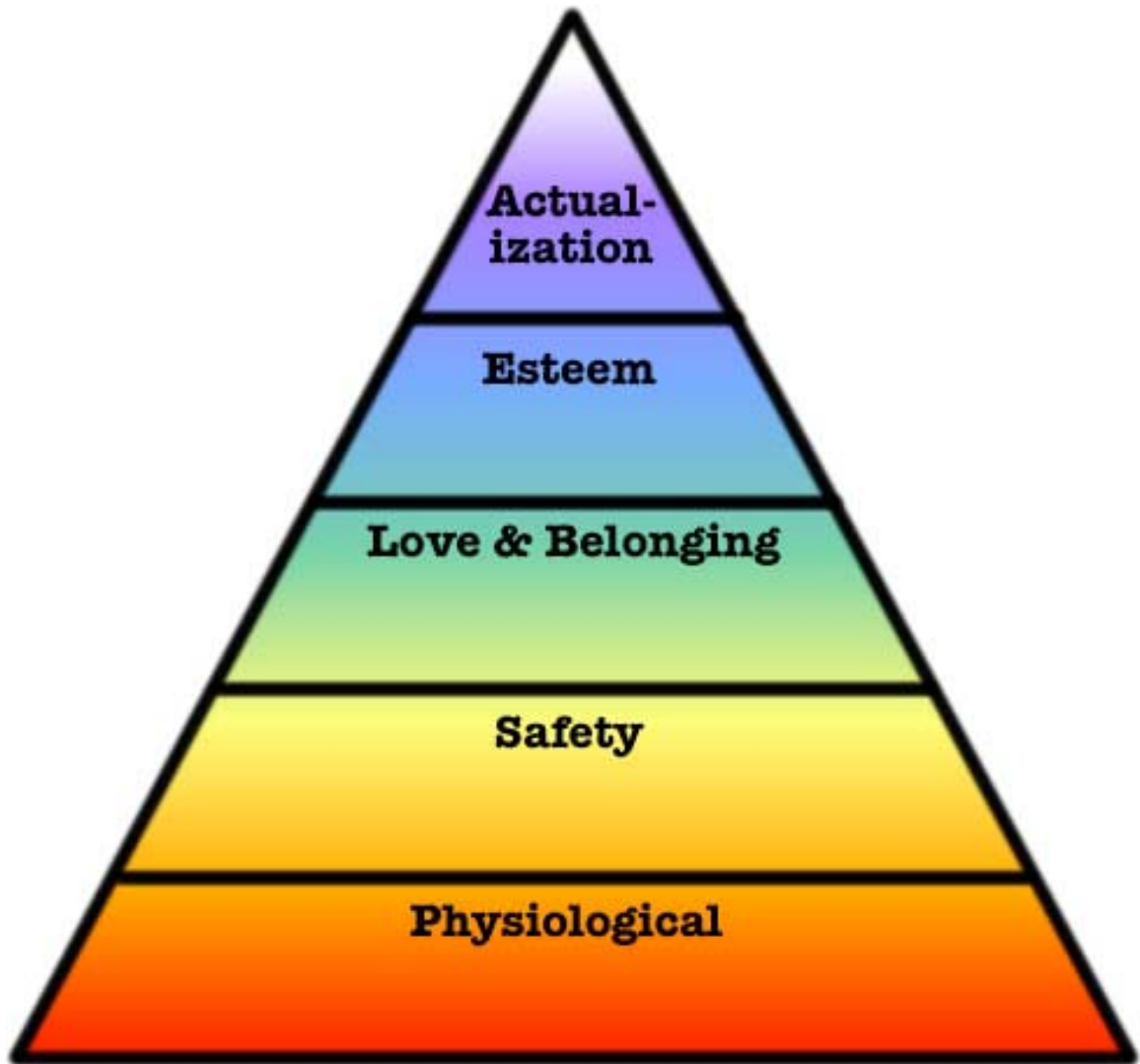
I love Abraham Maslow. He makes my job so much easier.

I met him first in nursing school, in my Introduction to Psychology textbook. He was a psychologist who sought the elements of humanity in psychology. He developed a now-famous Hierarchy of Needs, which I've reproduced below, and he sought the elements that lead to a healthy personality.

His work is wonderful in its own right—it also, however, creates a fantastic shortcut for writers who need to figure out what drives their characters, both the healthy ones, and those driven by neurosis, psychosis, or simple desperation.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is deceptively simple, and on the face of it, sort of obvious.

Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Need



You use the hierarchy by working from the bottom to the top. The individual will struggle to meet bottom needs before moving up the pyramid to higher needs.

**Physiological** needs are air, water, rest and sleep, nourishment, survivable climate, pain avoidance, and sex, pretty much in that order. We'll die without the first five (and frequently the sixth, as well, since feeling pain protects us from making deadly errors), while lack of the seventh would wipe out the species.

## *Create A Character Clinic*

Air is absolutely the most critical. You can do without it and hope to survive as yourself for about four minutes. Water—three days. Rest and sleep—about the same. Food—about a month. Climate depends. You fall into the water in a polar region, and you have almost no time to get to safety. Ditto being trapped on the bright side of the moon without an air-conditioned suit. Lesser extremes confer longer potential survival times. If your survival need are basically assured, you'll move on to trying to meet your next set of needs.

**Safety** needs follow physiological needs—shelter, income, self-defense, better neighborhood, cleaner air and water, safer schools, lights for dark corners, more reliable transportation, and much more. After we meet bare survival needs, we start working to make ourselves more comfortable, we seek to protect the things we acquire, and we seek to guard ourselves and those we love from predators.

**Love and Belonging** comes next. We need to know we are cared about; we need to care about others. We need to have a place where we belong, where we know our ideas and actions will be accepted or at least considered seriously and without animosity.

Then we reach **Esteem**, which is tricky. Maslow suggested two levels of esteem: The lower level encompasses the varieties of need for the respect of others—everything from the needs for status and dominance to the need for fame. The higher level encompasses the need to respect ourselves. We meet this when we live by the rules we set for ourselves, when we do things for others, when we exceed our own expectations, when we strive.

Finally, Maslow places **Actualization** at the pinnacle of the pyramid. Unlike the previous four varieties of needs, which (if we are psychologically healthy) no longer drive us once we have satisfied them, with actualization we will continue to feel these needs even after we meet them. They provide a reliable engine that moves us through our lives.

Our actualization needs become our mission in life; they inspire us, and we inspire others by pursuing them.

- **So ... why is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs a great shortcut for writers?**



Because you can throw a dart at that little diagram, and just by noting where it lands, you will understand what is driving your character. More importantly, you'll be able to make that need compelling and understandable to your reader.

Say your dart lands on the bottom rung. You have a character who is struggling for his very survival—we might meet him as he's about to drown following a shipwreck (he needs air); or, when he's scrambling across a deserted island seeking a waterfall, a spring, a rivulet, even a few drops of dew cupped in a leaf (he needs water); or, when he is one man among many men working along the Alaska pipeline, and all he can think about is meeting a woman (he needs sex.)

Say your dart lands near the top. You already know that this character has food, clothing, shelter, a way of meeting his survival needs, and a partner, a family, or a group that cares about him enough that he can function. What he may need is to win his place in the tribe, to pass his manhood initiation, to become a rock star loved by millions, to take over a corporate empire, or to be able to look himself in the eye when he's shaving each morning and know that he hasn't let himself down by cheating on his wife, stealing from his business partner, or humiliating himself through bad behavior.

If you'd like fuller explanations of the hierarchy of needs and Maslow's theory of self-actualization, you can find them in the following Internet articles:

- **Abraham Maslow:** <http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html>
- **Self-actualization:** <http://psikoloji.fisek.com.tr/maslow/self.htm>

These two essays are excellent, and the second one is inspirational.

With Maslow in mind, then, and with our thoughts firmly focused on what human beings need (and how those needs drive fictional characters), we'll start asking the questions that will allow us to create one fully-fleshed-out story character after another. We'll characterize our people by asking questions in seven areas:

## *Create A Character Clinic*

- Need, Pursuit & Avoidance
- Work & Play
- Past, Present & Future
- Friends, Enemies & Lovers
- Life & Death
- Culture, Religion & Education
- Moral Stance

## **CHARACTER THROUGH NEED, PURSUIT & AVOIDANCE**

**Every character needs something**—either to have it or to avoid it. Your job is to determine what one need your character feels most urgently, and put him under desperate pressure to get it, or get away from it. When you've done that, you have a story. The most powerful, most critical need is the need your character will risk what he most values to obtain, or escape. He will be obsessed, he will be driven, he will do foolish things, dangerous things, hopeless things.

He will be **compelled** by this need.

- **Every fictional character, just like every human being, has a compelling need.**

Real human beings have compelling needs, too. A lot of us, having most of our needs met, don't want anything particularly huge. A steady paycheck, someone less irritating to work for, weekends off, a better teacher: these needs can be compelling to an individual, but they're fairly small needs, and usually will create only low-grade responses to meet them. However, even small needs can make for big stories, depending on what the character is willing to risk to fulfill them.

In books written for children, the characters' needs frequently don't go beyond finding Mommy's missing necklace, which the young heroine borrowed, then lost. Or finding a way to be friends with a kid who's been a bully. Or keeping an activity hidden from adults or others who wouldn't understand. And the kid is limited in his response to these need by the writer's need to keep his behavior acceptable.

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I suspect that in the majority of children's fiction, both the protagonist's needs and the actions he takes to fulfill needs are kept small not because kids have less compelling needs, but because many young readers have parents who would object strenuously to Tiffany and Tyler reading about the darker and more desperate compelling needs that drive many real kids' lives.

There are plenty of exceptions to the "small needs in kid fiction" rule, and you'll find much of the better juvenile fiction is based around kids with bigger needs or with bigger responses to small needs.

In adult fiction, needs and actions are usually bigger, because adults are usually free to read whatever they want. Adult needs are everything you've ever considered, or lusted after, or fought to get away from. I've written about a man searching the world for his kidnapped and enslaved sister; a woman fighting to save herself from the ex-husband who—comatose—is still somehow pursuing her; a man, once a slave, fighting to bring down the system that is systematically and secretly slaughtering every human he has ever known or loved; a mother who will risk anything to save her two kidnapped children; a nurse who makes a deal with God to save the souls of the damned. And so on. Big needs.

Responses in stories geared for adults are equally broad, encompassing all varieties of heroism and villainy as these characters struggle and strive to meet their needs, whether healthy or unhealthy.

The compelling need is the desire that gets your character out of bed in the morning, that pulls him through the day, that makes him take risks, or that drives him to challenge others.

Your compelling needs can be simple—the need for food, or shelter, or safety. They can be complicated—the need to win the approval of someone else, the need to become rich, or famous; the need to make amends for some earlier act; or the need to discover the meaning of one's own life or purpose in all of life.

Once you've given your character something to want enough that he'd do almost anything to get it, a dozen other questions pop up, all of them guaranteed to make your character richer and more real.

*Holly Lisle*

The following questions are designed to help you work out a character's responses to his compelling need. (Remember, if you're having trouble coming up with a compelling need, throw a dart at or poke a finger at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and figure out which struggle in the category you've landed on would interest you.)

Look over these questions. I'll develop a few of them, and make comments about my development, and then have you work your way through them, too.

Figure 2: Compelling Need Chart



**What is the character's compelling need?**

- I. Does he pursue it?
  - A. Does he know what he pursues (has he caught it before) or does he imagine it?
  - B. If he imagines it, does reality have much in common with his dream?
    1. If he knows it, how did he lose it?
- II. Does he flee it?
  - A. Does he flee certainty—that is, has he faced and suffered through that which pursues him in the past?
    1. If so, what certainty does he flee?
    2. How has it affected him?
    3. How will it affect him if it catches up to him again?
- III. Is he more motivated to avoid pain, or to achieve pleasure?
  - A. What pain does he most fear?
  - B. What pleasure does he most desire?
  - C. How can you force him to suffer through one to get the other?
- IV. What hardship in the past caused the character to need this?
  - A. Who knows about this need?
  - B. When did this need begin?
  - C. How does the character plan to meet this need?
- V. How has the character tried, and failed, to meet this need in the past?
  - A. What daily events does this need affect? And how does it affect them?
  - B. What price had the character already paid for this need?
  - C. What price will he have to pay in the future?
  - D. Who has been affected by the character as he pursues this need?
    1. Has this person, group, or class of people been hurt or helped?
- VI. What rules does he voluntarily follow in the pursuit of his need?  
(Rules of personal morality)
  - A. How might he break these rules?
  - B. Why might he break them?
  - C. What would happen if he did?
- VII. What rules are imposed on him from outside? (Rules of law and social convention)
  - A. How might he break these rules?
  - B. Why might he break them?

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- C. What will happen to him if he does?
- VIII. What rituals or habits spring out of the search for this need?
- IX. Where does the character pursue his goals?
- X. What objects does he use in the pursuit of his need?
- XI. What good things has he done to move him closer to his goal?
- XII. What bad things has he done to move him closer to his goal?

## **Some Sample Answers**

### **I. What is the character's compelling need?**

Let's start by taking a look at this. Realize that the character's compelling need at the beginning of the book does not need to be his compelling need at the end. People change, situations change, and the thing that gave your day zing when you were ten may not be the thing that gives it zing when you're twenty, or thirty, or forty.

I'll do a little demo of a compelling need, starting with a brand new character.

My character wants more than anything in the world to get out of debt, so that she can provide for her family without having to work so hard, deal with creditors, and have the constant worry of falling behind. In Maslow's Hierarchy, she's still struggling near the bottom of the pyramid, in Safety.

Right off the bat, I've determined that she's female. This isn't a flip-of-a-coin selection; men and women are so very different that you have to consider that gender will take your story in totally different directions. If my character were male, the compelling need to pay debts might bring gambling, bookies, a thug with a baseball bat, my hero with muscles and a bat of his own ....

For a female character, while you can pursue the same threads, you're not going to get the same emotional riffs from them. A woman with a gambling problem is much less sympathetic than a male. A woman who goes after the thug with martial arts skills and muscles is much less believable than a male would be. You can pursue these routes, but they're a harder sell.



A woman's story may involve a spouse who ran up a lot of debt before splitting, or dying; a house that is falling to pieces around her, and for which she is spending more than she can afford just to keep the family under roof; a sick kid whose care eats up every bit of her budget. Maybe she's borderline manic-depressive (bipolar) and in her manic states, she's run up enormous debts. Maybe she has a husband or lover who is a spendthrift, while she's responsible, but overburdened. Or maybe her issue is just life. Little things that keep adding up, while she struggles with a job that doesn't.

Jumping out of order a bit, then ....

## **II. What hardship in the past caused the character to need this?**

This isn't a required question; that is, you can take it or leave it. If your character is a nine-year-old girl whose only dream is to have a horse, then it's unlikely that her compelling need is hardship driven. In my case, it works, so I'll go with it.

I'll say that my character has been left with the house that her beloved husband and she bought together and were going to fix up before he was hit by a car (or some other sudden, awful thing) and now she's left with only her income plus Social Security, four kids under the age of ten, and a sprawling, falling-down Victorian. They didn't have enough insurance to help with much of anything, and she's having a really rough time.

## **III. Who knows about this need?**

Not her kids, that's for sure. She isn't the type of woman who's going to complain to the kids about how hard things are. She keeps her problems to herself and tries to do what she can to make their lives fun and exciting and full of love and joy.

Her parents will know. But they live a long way away, and are not in any position to help her out with money. His parents will know, but I think they'll have some sort of problem with her. Maybe they're jerks. Maybe they're disappointed with the choices she made. Maybe in some fashion they blame her for his death.

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Perhaps someone who wants the house or the land it sits on for some reason knows about her money problems. Maybe her best friend knows, and keeps trying to talk her into dumping the house and finding some cheap place in town.

### **IV. When did the character begin to need this?**

This is an easy question for me, because I already answered it. Her need began when her husband died. It may be a hard question for you, if you've gone another route in developing your character. Knowing when a need developed can tell you a huge amount about where your character has already been, and give you a hint at where he's likely to try to go.

### **V. How does the character plan to meet this need?**

You can make good use of this question to start adding in problems for the character to deal with. There is nothing like a bad plan, or a good plan that doesn't work out the way you had hoped it would, to complicate a life.

I have not answered all the questions—nor would I answer all of them to begin with while putting together my story. I want to hold on to the capacity to be surprised by my character, so as I work my way through the story, I'll follow up on her compelling need: I'll check on how it changes; I'll add depth and complications to it by asking and answering other questions.

You don't need to answer all the compelling need questions, either. Follow your interests, your gut instinct—pursue answers to the questions that most interest you, back and fill a little, get a feeling for your character's compelling need and the problems that arise out of it. By all means, ask your own follow-up questions that arise from the answers you get from the first questions you ask. When you're excited by what you have, and are having usable ideas, stop answering questions for a while, and start pursuing the ideas. The compelling-needs diagram is a starting-point, and will become a jumpstart point. Every time you stall or become uncertain about your direction as you write your story, go back and ask more questions.

I don't fill out long, complicated character sheets when developing my characters. I used to, but I found that approach actually kept me from writing. I get to know my people as events force them to deal with hardship, loss, and other challenges. I keep asking questions as I go. But knowing too much about a person before I start prevents me from adapting them to situations later. It prevents them from being spontaneous. That's a big deal.

## **EXERCISE: Compelling Need**

Start with the central **compelling need** question. Ask it without worrying yet about who your character is. You don't need a name, a history, or a story. If you already have them, and you are doing this to edit existing work, that's fine. But if you aren't, all you need to begin with right here is one human being's desperate, yearning, aching desire to have, to do, to be or to avoid something.

Allow yourself to pick a big need without thinking too much about it. Trust yourself to write it down and then let it go.

Move on to some of the questions listed above, and if one branches in a new direction, ask new questions, and follow them with more answers and more questions.

Don't edit yourself, don't judge what you're getting as stupid, or not important enough, or—please, please—not commercial. For now, you're creating people, and people come in all varieties and can most assuredly be a bit rough around the edges when you start with them.

**What you are writing now is first draft. Save revision (and being critical of your writing) for second draft.** In first draft, you pursue character, story, and information, and you're allowed to be terrible. In second draft, you concentrate on making what you have written good. This statement should be kept in mind for every exercise that follows.

When you have a couple hundred words or more (at least one typed, double-spaced page), stop.

# **CHARACTER THROUGH WORK & PLAY**

## **How I've Used Work and Play**

Once you know what your people need, you're only just getting started, because people are so much more than just one need. And even when you're just looking at that ever-important compelling need, and how it's going to change, you still have to go after who your character is, what he does, and how he does it.

Work and play do not define us as human beings, but they do shed some interesting light on a few of our public and private angles.

I'm going to offer a demonstration of how a character's interests outside of her work help us understand a little more about who she is. I've taken an excerpt from **TALYN** (Tor, 2005), where I've demonstrated my main character and a colleague at play.

This portion of the scene snowballs into something huge later in the book. There's a hook in a section just past the point I've offered here that is critical to the whole plot of the novel. But if I'd started the scene there, it would have made too much of something that I managed, through a little sleight of hand, to hide. This section is that sleight of hand.

This section is exactly what it looks like—two tired young soldiers, both knowledgeable and fanatical horsewomen, who are lured to a public corral in the hopes of seeing spectacular horses going up for auction.

*"We'll know by the crowd when we're a block away, if it's true."*

*I was right and I was wrong. We knew it was true when we were still two blocks from the horse market, because clusters and knots of citizens were hurrying there with pockets jangling. The Aklintaak traders had come to town, bringing with them the finest horses from the Aklintaak fjords, and from the Tonk breeders in far-off Tandinapolis. When they came to town, they frequently stopped by the post moneychanger and traded their horse cash for gold, since gold is a bit easier to spend locally unless you're in the service. Taakfolk are used to taking strange currency from us. Horse cash is good as gold, though. It's backed by Tonk horses, and those, frankly, are better than gold.*

*We were tired from a long shift, dark had fallen long ago and bed would be the only sensible destination, and even so, the horses called to us. I've heard all the jokes about how a horse is as good as a man to a Tonk girl; but if you remove the innuendo from that statement, it is not far from true. Even Tonks born in taaks instead of among the nomadic clans learn to ride when we learn to walk, and spend as many hours in the saddle as we can arrange from then on. Horsemasters are on an equal social standing with those of us in Magics, and just a step below the taaklords. A good horse breeder can afford to be picky when deciding whether to include the local taaklord on his dinner invitation list.*

*Pada and I wore our uniforms, having not taken even the little time we would have needed to go to the barracks to change. So the crowd opened up for us, and we found ourselves hanging off the paddock fence like children, watching as the handlers trotted the new arrivals past us to the stables.*

*They would not be for sale until the morrow, after they'd been fed and rested and groomed, but if we saw a horse we liked, we could put a marker and a sealed bid on it.*

*I wanted many of them. I could not in truth say that I needed a new saddle horse, but having one would give me a second that I could alternate. I saw a fine dappled gray gelding that I fancied—he had a smooth gait and a good solid back, he carried his head up and danced a bit as he trotted. Beautiful.*

## Create A Character Clinic

*And then there was the bay. Ah, Saints. She came from the Tand steppes, I would bet my life on it. Not a spot of white on her. Her coat gleamed like dark rubies beneath the torches, with the black of her muzzle, mane, tail, and legs sheened like good silk. She had the light bones, the quickness, the fire, the delicate stature of a pureblood Tand, and I'd bet her pedigree was twice as long as mine. Those Tand horses always look like they will blow away in the first hard wind, but there is no horse tougher. And rarely one faster. If I wanted to drop half a year's pay in a day, I might have her. But if I had her and didn't breed her, I'd be criminally remiss, and I couldn't afford to start breeding horses and still work with my jewelry.*

*She would no doubt go to a taaklord. No doubt. And he would rejoice in her, or be a fool.*

*But in my heart, I lusted after her, and promised myself that some day I would love to have a horse that fine.*

I wanted to cover a lot of ground in this first part of the scene. I wanted to establish that both women knew horses—an important part of being Tonk. I wanted to show them at a point where they weren't getting on each other's nerves: horses are a piece of common ground that they share unreservedly, even though in other ways they're pretty incompatible as friends. I wanted to distract from something that happens later in the scene, and Talyn's and Pada's addiction to horses makes a solid distraction. I wanted to give a feel for the world in which they live, and their place in it. In this handful of paragraphs, I think I met the goals I set for myself.

## How You Can Use Work and Play

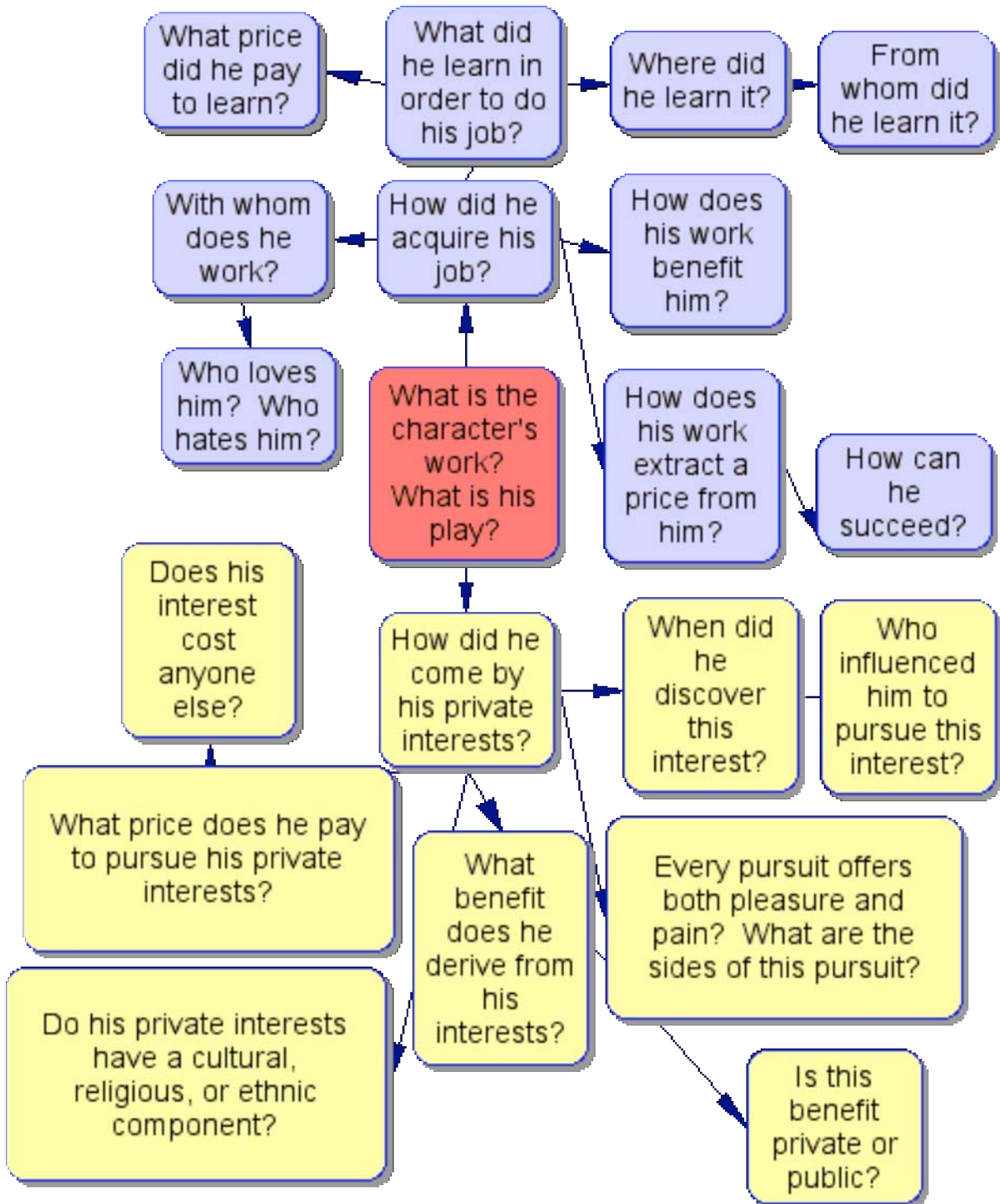
You'll need to think about questions related to your character's work and play. Work is what is required of him to go from day to day, play is what he pursues out of love or other passion. A child character from a first-world nation today will probably view education and household chores as work, whereas just a century back, his work might have been not much different from an adult's work—whether toiling in the fields, or

working in a factory—and his passion might have been gleaning as much education as possible from any source he could find, rather than nagging his parents for the latest plasticrap advertised on television. In much of the world, being an essential contributor to the household economy (in good or bad ways) is still a child's life.

Adult work today is usually considered the job that pays the bills, or the nurturing that takes care of the family. But even today, there are a few remaining hunter-gatherer societies where work is bare subsistence, and money, the acquisition of "stuff", and self-actualization are not only not obsessions, but aren't even concepts. And there are countless societies where the commerce model hasn't yet caught hold, and where life revolves not around getting more things, but around other values (some better and some considerably worse than the Quest for Stuff.) In our own society, too, there are groups who do not choose to live within the mainstream consumer culture; the Amish, Mennonites and Hutterites, various communes and cults, and even individual families who have chosen to place their goals elsewhere than the American Consumer buy-spend treadmill.

Work and play, then, are not the same for everyone, and do not hold the same importance to everyone. It's critical to remember that in developing your characters, your choices for their work and play are much, much broader than the few choices you see around you, no matter your environment. Look around a little. Dare to step outside your comfort zone.

Figure 3: **Work and Play** Chart





**What is the character's work? What is his play?**

- I. How did he acquire his job?
  - A. With whom does he work?
    - 1. Who loves him? Who hates him?
  - B. How does his work benefit him?
  - C. What did he learn in order to do his job?
    - 1. Where did he learn it?
    - 2. From whom did he learn it?
    - 3. What price did he pay to learn?
  - D. How does his work extract a price from him?
    - 1. How can he succeed?
- II. How did he come by his private interests?
  - A. Do his private interests have a cultural, religious, or ethnic component?
  - B. Every pursuit offers both pleasure and pain? What are the sides of this pursuit?
  - C. What price does he pay to pursue his private interests?
    - 1. Does his interest cost anyone else?
  - D. What benefit does he derive from his interests?
    - 1. Is this benefit private or public?
  - E. When did he discover this interest?
    - 1. Who influenced him to pursue this interest?

Let's work our way through a few of these questions. Again, this is a starter list, meant mostly to get you thinking about various aspects of work and play as they relate to any given individual and his associates. As you start answering questions, pursue the additional questions your answers raise in your mind. And, although it isn't listed on the diagram above, ALWAYS consider the essential **why**. (This particular caveat will be understood to pertain to all the following sections on questions and answers.

**I. What is the character's work? What is his play?**

My character works in the personnel department of a large and soulless corporation; she's an anonymous face to those outside of her department, and is far enough down the promotion ladder that she's unlikely to be considered for a better job even within her own department. She makes marginally more than minimum wage; she

## *Create A Character Clinic*

hates her job but is afraid to leave it because she's afraid she might not find something else.

### **II. How did he acquire his job?**

A friend told her about an opening in her own department, but that opening had been filled when Mary went in to apply. Instead, she was given the entry-level job in personnel.

### **III. With whom does he work?**

Lessee .... The head of Mary's department has been there since God created dirt. She's a petty tyrant who lives to wield her power over those beneath her. She hates Mary, because Mary's four kids require attention that distracts her from her job with fair regularity. One of Mary's coworkers is the guy who, having reached the level of his incompetence in another department, has been given a lateral promotion to get him out of any area where he could do real damage; he tries to pawn his own work off on Mary as often as possible.

And so on.

## **EXERCISE: Work and Play**

Answer at least three of the Work and Play questions, starting with the central one. Let yourself run longer than I did—write at least one full page. If you find a thread that interests you, pursue it, asking yourself more questions as you go.

## **CHARACTER THROUGH PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE**

We are the sum of everything we have done, everything we are doing, and everything we aspire to do. We live in the now, but rarely evade our pasts, and though we constantly change our futures, never escape them.

Our characters require that same complexity, that same sense of being grounded in events that came before and in being aimed toward events in the future. We don't always have to share their pasts. But we have to know them.

### **The Past**

The past is a treasure trove of both angst and triumph for your characters; in it you can hide guilty secrets, lost lovers, betrayed friends, great pets, long-demolished previous homes or neighborhoods or even countries. These tantalizing fragments can inspire you to discover whole stories that you never suspected, and can revive your interest in a flagging story or character—there's nothing like the reappearance of a long-forgotten lover or enemy to complicate your character's present.

With that in mind, here are starter questions for your character's past. In the diagram, threads are color-coded for convenience.

Figure 4: Past Chart



**PAST**

- I. What is the most traumatic event he has suffered?
  - A. What caused this event?
  - B. Was there blame to be taken, and if so, who was at fault?
  - C. How have the scars from this event changed the direction of his life?
  - D. What would he have done differently if he could have changed one thing?
- II. What is the event that changed the direction of his life?
  - A. Does he consider this event as having influenced him positively or negatively?
  - B. How has it really influenced him?
  - C. What role did he play in this event?
  - D. What role did those he cared about play in this event?
  - E. What would he do differently if something similar happened again?
  - F. How has he changed his life to accommodate or live with what happened?
- III. Where is his first memory?
  - A. Who or what was in it?
  - B. What emotions does he feel when he thinks of the memory?
  - C. What ties to his present life exist from this past memory?
  - D. What of importance is gone and irretrievable from this memory?
- IV. Who is the first person whose death he felt as a loss?
  - A. How did this death occur?
  - B. How did he come to learn of it?
  - C. How old was he when it happened?
  - D. Could it have been prevented?
  - E. How did the loss affect him at the time?
  - F. How does it affect him now?
- V. What was the best thing he has ever done?
  - A. Was this moment of heroism or triumph private or public?
  - B. Did he receive any recognition for his success?
  - C. Did he experience any repercussions, whether positive or negative, for what he did?
  - D. How did this event change him?
  - E. Does it still affect him in any way?

## *Create A Character Clinic*

- VI. What was his moment of greatest humiliation?
  - A. How did it start?
  - B. Who brought it about?
  - C. Who witnessed it?
  - D. What repercussions did it have in his life then?
  - E. What repercussions does it have now?
- VII. What event does he credit with making him who he is?
  - A. Is it the same event those around him believe was most formative?

Here are a few of my answers:

### **I. What is the most traumatic event he has suffered?**

Mary was kidnapped and held prisoner in a cage, and was systematically beaten and starved for about four months, when she was 11 years old. The person who did this was her step-father, who had been kicked out of their home some months before, and who had finally realized that he was not going to be able to effect a reconciliation with Mary's mother.

During the time that her stepfather held Mary prisoner, he took photographs of her deteriorating condition, and sent them from distant post offices to Mary's mother, along with the warning that if she ever told anybody, and if she didn't take him back, Mary would die. Mary's mother went to the police, who managed to backtrack her ex to his hideout and rescue Mary. The man himself was never found.

### **II. What caused this event?**

The death of Mary's father two years before, and the progressive and debilitating poverty of the family following that event, followed by Mary's mother giving up her secretarial job and marrying the first man who asked her. The man she married turned out to be abusive both to Mary's mother, and to Mary and the other children. He was also a heavy drinker. He did usually pay the bills, but he blamed Mary's children for coming between the two of them.

### **III. Was there blame to be taken, and if so, who was at fault?**

Mary's mother was at fault for marrying a man she knew in her gut was not trustworthy. The man she married was at fault for being a creep.

**IV. How have the scars from this event changed the direction of his life?**

Mary has serious trust issues with men. Her father was wonderful, and she was able to have a successful marriage because she was able to hold on to that memory and find a man who was good and trustworthy. However, she cannot consider marrying or even dating another man, because that man would become the stepfather to her four children.

And so on ....

**EXERCISE: Past**

Answer a few questions from your character's past. Dare to be a little outrageous—to make your characters have pasts bigger and more full of tragedy and triumph than the average person's. Don't be afraid to hurt them, or to give them big obstacles to overcome in their present-day lives. Pursue interesting threads that you develop, asking your own questions and surprising yourself with the answers. But don't answer everything. Save questions for later. You want your character to have the ability to surprise you.

## The Present

Next, the present. This is what your character is suffering and turmoiling and trudging and perhaps even leaping giddily through at the moment, whether he knows it or not. And within that little caveat—whether he knows it or not—we can hide a world of wonderful surprises. Because your character is not the whole world, and there are things going on around him that are not initiated by him, that he is not aware of, but that nonetheless are going to affect him, whether he wants them to or not.

In his present, you bring in some of the elements you discovered in his past, whether long ago or recent. You start questioning cause and effect—what problems and triumphs from the past are still affecting him in the present.

You also look at new things—new people, new places, new work and play, new hopes and dreams—and you begin to tie them together with who he is and how he became who he is. Here are the questions:



Figure 5: Present Chart



## *Create A Character Clinic*

### **PRESENT**

- I. What is the best thing happening to him currently?
  - A. Is this something he has earned?
  - B. Who else is involved in this?
  - C. Is it something he's aware of?
    - i. If not, how might he find out about it?
    - ii. What will be the effect if he doesn't find out?
    - iii. What will be the effect if he does?
    - iv. Who else knows?
- II. What is the worst thing happening to him currently?
  - A. Who or what is causing this problem?
  - B. Is it something he can fix?
    - i. If so, is there a reason why he hasn't yet?
    - ii. If not, who can fix it?
    - iii. If it must be lived with, how will it affect him?
  - C. Is it something he is aware of?
    - i. If not, how might he find out?
    - ii. Who does know?
    - iii. What will be the effect if he doesn't find out?
- III. What present-day goals does he have?
  - A. Are these optimistic or pessimistic goals?
  - B. Which goal is most important to him?
    - i. Why?
    - ii. What will happen if he accomplishes it?
    - iii. What does he think will happen?
    - iv. How are these two things different, and what effect will their areas of difference have on his life?
  - C. Who knows about this goal?
    - i. Who supports it?
    - ii. Who opposes it?
    - iii. Which goal is more important to someone else?
    - iv. To whom, and why?
- IV. What present-day failures does he struggle against?
  - A. How has he failed?
  - B. Whom has he failed?
  - C. Where has he failed?
  - D. Why has he failed?
- V. What present-day beliefs has he acquired recently?
- VI. What present-day lies has he told?

Here are some of my answers:

**I. What is the best thing happening to him currently?**

A wonderful young man has moved in next door to her. He's a dedicated commercial artist who has been alone a long time. He has an unhappy marriage and quick, ugly divorce behind him, and he was pretty sure he wasn't looking for anyone else, until he met Mary.

**II. Is this something he has earned?**

Mary has only earned the possibility of a second great relationship in the "if there's any justice in the universe, then she'll find someone else" sense. So not really. But it would be great for both of them if she could get past her (well-earned) fear.

**III. Who else is involved in this?**

When her next-door neighbor realized that she was determined not to see any of the signs he gave her that he was interested, he was about to write her off. But then he found himself talking to her best friend one day, and discovered the past that she hadn't bothered to mention. He began to realize that he might be able to win her over; but more than that, he discovered she had real reasons for not being willing to consider taking the chance on falling in love or marrying again.

**IV. Is it something he's aware of?**

Mary has no clue that he's interested in her, and no clue that her friends are conspiring with him to get the two of them together.

**EXERCISE: Present**

I'd recommend answering more of these to begin with than in any other category; since your story will take place primarily in its own present, these questions will give you many of your initial conflicts. As you link them to the past and the future, you'll develop the context of your conflicts.

## The Future

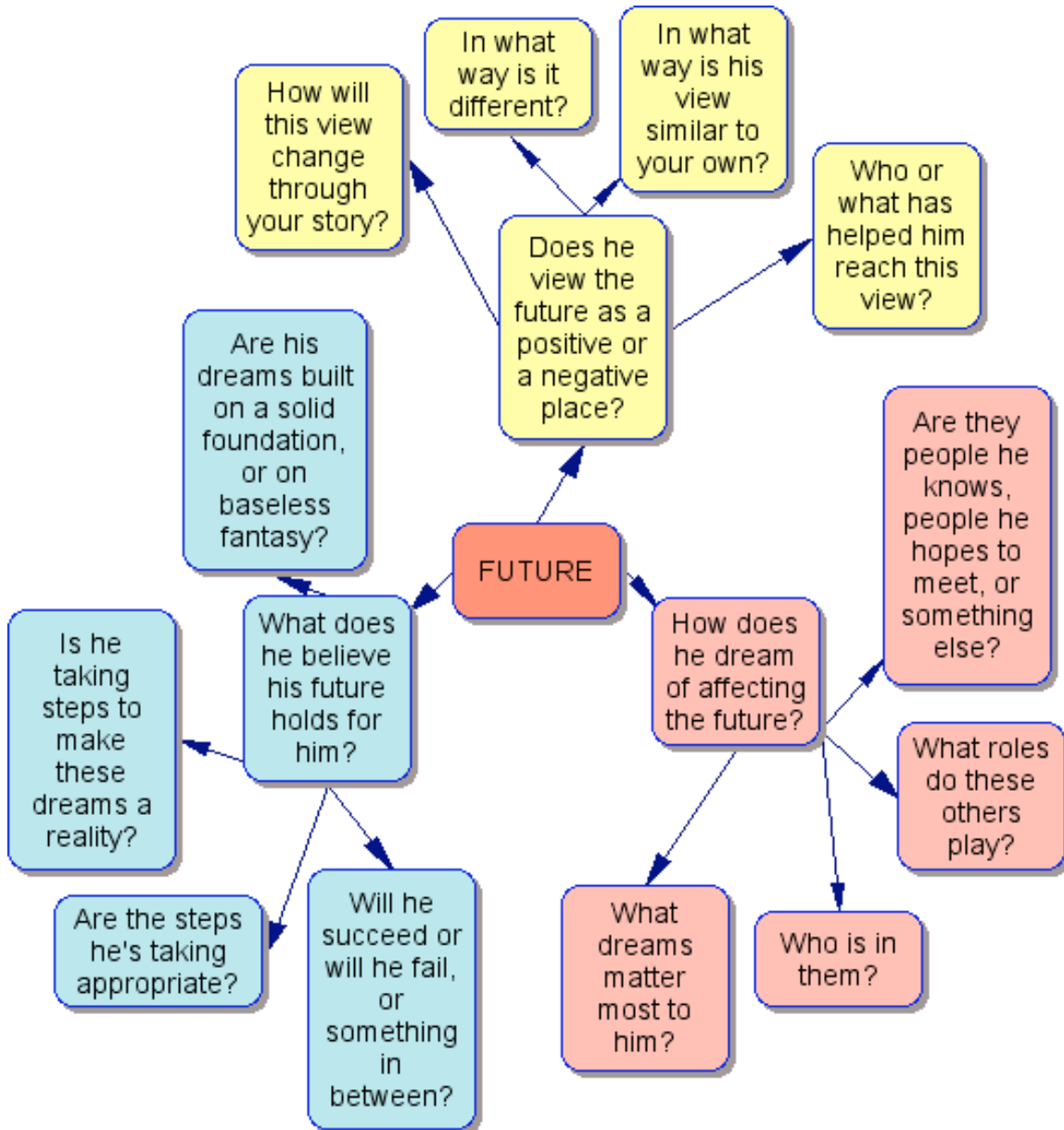
Herein lies the hope and the fear of humanity. We neither fear nor hope for the past. It's done; whatever havoc it has wrought in our lives is over; and, though we may still be living with the consequences and fallout, it cannot throw any new surprises our way. The present we live in and endure, and we don't fear or hope for that, either.

But what will happen in the next instant, the next day, the next year or ten years or hundred years—that we fill up with every terror and every joy our imaginations can summon, according to our own natures.

These hopes and fears make us human. There are schools of thought that suggest our ability to see death coming, and to still strive to achieve in the face of that inevitable defeat, is the defining characteristic of being human. Whether or not that is the case, your characters need hopes and fears and goals and dreams, too.

Here are a few starter questions to help you identify them:

Figure 6: **Future** Chart



## **FUTURE**

- I. What does he believe his future holds for him?
  - A. Are his dreams built on a solid foundation, or on baseless fantasy?
  - B. Is he taking steps to make these dreams a reality?
  - C. Are the steps he's taking appropriate?
  - D. Will he succeed or will he fail, or something in between?
- II. Does he view the future as a positive or a negative place?
  - A. Who or what has helped him reach this view?
  - B. In what way is his view similar to your own?
  - C. In what way is it different?
  - D. How will this view change through your story?
- III. How does he dream of affecting the future?
- IV. What dreams matter most to him?
- V. Who is in them?
  - A. What roles do these others play?
  - B. Are they people he knows, people he hopes to meet, or something else?

Here are a few of my answers:

### **I. What does he believe his future holds for him?**

Mary always thought that she'd have a great future growing old with the man she loved, watching their children and grandchildren growing up—and that they'd have the chance some day to travel, do the music that they both loved and pursue their dreams. When her husband died, she believed that her future was over. She could only see two possibilities—struggling day to day just to get by and care for her children while living out the rest of her life alone, at least until they were grown (and who would want her then?) or taking an unthinkable risk in meeting and perhaps marrying someone who could (and in her mind, almost certainly would) turn out to be the nightmare that her stepfather had been.

### **II. Are his dreams built on a solid foundation, or on baseless fantasy?**

Mary's thoughts of the future are firmly based in the reality of her past, and though all the miserable outcomes are not as likely as she believes them to be, still, they can't be dismissed as ridiculous, either.

**III. Is he taking steps to make these dreams a reality?**

She is struggling in a job that is beneath her talents, afraid to look for something better because it could always turn out to be worse. At the moment, all she can think about is that the bird in the hand is a hell of a lot better than no bird at all. And she's avoiding all men. So she is doing everything she can to make her dreariest possibilities reality, though she doesn't see it that way.

**IV. Are the steps he's taking appropriate?**

No. They are understandable, but they are much less than what she could be doing for herself and her children.

And I could go on, and on.

**EXERCISE: Future**

Spend quality time on these questions. Realize that in the course of your story, part of your job is going to be to put obstacles in the way of your character's hopes and dreams, and to bring the worst of his fears to life. So give him some dreams worth dashing, and some fears worth fearing.

And remember, not everyone dreams of greatness. Some people dream of soup.

## **CHARACTER THROUGH FRIENDS, ENEMIES & LOVERS**

Books being about people (of one sort or another, including the occasional alien or tribe of sentient rabbits), they also have to be about conflict between people, at least to some degree. Even if you're writing about a giant killer asteroid hurtling toward the earth and how everyone on the planet pitches in to save the place, you still have to start with how they weren't together in the first place, and how they overcome obstacles to get together.

If you don't have conflict, you don't have a book.

But if you don't have conflict, you don't have real people, either.

It's commonly understood that the only person who will agree with you one hundred percent of the time is you. (If you're a Libra like me, make that fifty percent of the time.) The instant you introduce a second person to your story, you introduce possibilities for all the wonderful conflict your heart and your story could hope for, and it doesn't matter whether the person you're introducing is a lover, a friend, or an enemy.

You will have traipsed through your character's past and present, and run into a few of the people who populated or continue to populate his world. Now is the time to find out more about those folks.

Here are your questions:



Figure 7: Friends, Enemies & Lovers Chart



## **FRIENDS, ENEMIES & LOVERS**

- I. Whom does he hate?
  - A. How did this hatred begin?
    1. What came before it?
    2. Who started it?
  - B. Is it mutual?
  - C. Is it public or private?
  - D. Is it a hot or cold hatred?
  - E. Is it justified or unjustified?
- II. Whom does he like?
  - A. What is the most important event the two share?
    1. How did it happen, and when?
    2. What were the long-term consequences of that event?
  - B. Where do they spend time together? At work? Recreationally?
  - C. What do they not like about each other?
  - D. Who approves of their friendship? Who disapproves?
    1. Why?
  - E. How did they meet?
    1. Where?
    2. In what context—work, play, trouble, or good times?
    3. Does he accurately recall the circumstances of their meeting? If so, why?
  - F. What do they have in common?
  - G. Who knows about their friendship? Who doesn't?
    1. Why is the importance of it being known to or hidden from that person?
- III. Whom does he love?
  - A. Why does he love her?
  - B. How did he come to love her?
  - C. What is the biggest hardship they have faced together?
  - D. How does she complement him?
  - E. How does she drive him crazy?
  - F. How do they fight?
  - G. How do they make up?
  - H. What are their shared dreams?
    1. Which of her dreams does he hate?
    2. Which of his dreams does she hate?
    3. Does either ever act to undermine the dreams of the other?
      - a) If so, why?

Here are a few questions I worked out as demos:

**I. Whom does he hate?**

Mary hates her stepfather, who has never been caught or even located. She hopes he's dead; that he drowned or was eaten by alligators or something equally horrible while escaping from the police who arrived to rescue her.

**II. Is it mutual?**

Yes. Mary's stepfather is still alive, and has been keeping track of her and her siblings. Her mother has since remarried—to a really nice man, so stepfather can't get to Mary's mother. Mary's brothers are inconveniently located and big, burly guys besides. But, though her stepfather didn't have anything to do with Mary's husband's death, he does think that it would be delightful to kidnap her—and perhaps her children, and take up punishing Mary's mother where he left off.

(And a personal aside here. I didn't know this when I started answering questions. Had no idea. But now that this particularly juicy bit of information has dropped into my lap, I have to say that I think this particular book is becoming something I might actually want to write.)

**III. Is it public, or private?**

Her hatred is public, but not something she displays to strangers. Her friends know her past and know of her hatred for her stepfather, and all thoroughly agree with it.

**IV. Is it a hot or cold hatred?**

Hot hatred flares in an instant, takes whatever actions it will take, and then burns out. Cold hatred lingers for years, building and growing. Hers is a cold, slow hatred. She has spent years thinking about what she would do if ever she got another shot at the man who tried to destroy her and her mother. She will not be a passive victim if ever she runs into him again. And even after all these years, she lives warily, planning the defense of herself and her children, just in case.

**EXERCISE: Friends, Enemies and Lovers**

So you see how a character starts coming together. How things come at you from nowhere, and offer you intriguing possibilities. Choose a few questions from the Enemies thread, the Friends thread, and the Lovers thread, and develop a few side characters. You can later follow up on these as much as you need to.

# **CHARACTER THROUGH LIFE & DEATH**

## **Ultimate Stakes**

Not all stories are about life and death. But even in the most light-hearted story, your character lives while aging, heading from being aware, vibrant, present, passionate, foolish, daring, crazy or brave, to being ... gone. And whether he constantly faces this truth or not, it is a part of his existence encoded into a fragile, finite clock that, once it stops, cannot be rewound. One day all his options will be up.

Life and death are worth pursuing, even if you're writing comedy, because some of the richest and truest humor is born of our species' hubris in challenging death, and in living as if it will never catch us.

Figure 8: Life & Death Chart



## LIFE AND DEATH

- I. Does the character consider his own mortality?
  - A. If so, in what context? (work, hobby, chronic illness, acute illness, etc.)
  - B. Is he optimistic or pessimistic by nature?
  - C. Does he consider the mortality of others?
- II. Does he fear death?
  - A. If he does not fear death, what gives him courage?
  - B. If he does fear death, how does he deal with his fear?
- III. In what manner does the character risk his life?
  - A. Does he do so voluntarily, or under duress?
  - B. Does he do so on a daily basis, and if so, why, and how?
- IV. In what way does he avoid risk?
  - A. How does this avoidance hinder his daily existence?
  - B. How does this avoidance help his fears, and how does it make them worse?
- V. In what way does the character value life?
  - A. What consequences have these attitudes had in the past?
  - B. Does he value others' lives, or merely his own?
    1. How does he act on these values?
    2. How would he like to act on these values?
    3. What consequences will they have in the future?
- VI. In what way does he trivialize life?
  - A. What consequences have these attitudes already had?
  - B. What consequences will these attitudes have in the future?

## *Create A Character Clinic*

Here are three of my answers:

### **I. Does he fear death?**

Mary doesn't fear death for herself as much as she fears being unable to protect her children. She lives in abject terror of anything happening to her kids, though.

### **II. If he does not fear death, what gives him courage?**

She has the courage to hang on and fight in order to protect her children. So long as she can keep them safe, she'll do anything she has to do and anything she can.

### **III. If he does fear death, how does he deal with his fear?**

Mary deals poorly with thoughts of anything happening to her kids. She understands just how horrible things can get (and knows that situations could get even worse than what she experienced, too), and just letting them walk out of her sight is sometimes more than she can bear. She has nightmares, she has daymares, she has the occasional panic attack when she can't find or reach one of them.

## **EXERCISE: Life and Death**

Work out some of your own questions on this subject. Don't be afraid to take on the tough ones, and don't be afraid to let your character have weaknesses. Every weakness is a place where he can grow through the course of the story.



## **CHARACTER THROUGH CULTURE, RELIGION & EDUCATION**

### **Who They Are, What They Believe**

Want to start a war? Start right here. Start with the hot points of not just our civilization but of **every** civilization.

I suspect you're looking at the chapter title and saying to yourself, "Okay—I can see culture. Right. Totally there. That'll blow up on you, especially if politics is a part of culture. And religion ... definitely a hot point. But education? Little kids at their desks, being bored out of their skulls?"

Education is what we do to train/indoctrine/pass on both culture and religion. It is, furthermore, a lifelong process. Without education (which in reality has little to do with classrooms and teachers), neither religion nor culture would make the leap from generation to generation. Figure—if you take kids born into one culture and religion, pull them out of their native culture before they can reason, and immerse them in a new culture and religion, the second set of values, not the first, will be the set they learn and live.

Where your character fits into his world is entirely derived from these external influences until he learns to reason, and considerably longer than that, if, learning to reason, he doesn't actually apply the effort to do it.

## *Create A Character Clinic*

Maybe your readers won't need to know what made him who he is at the earliest stages of his life. But you do.

Figure 9: Culture, Religion & Education Chart



## **CULTURE, RELIGION, AND EDUCATION**

- I. From what ethnic or cultural heritage does your character come?
  - A. Are his family members still bound to their culture?
  - B. What celebrations does he observe that set him outside of the norm?
  - C. What beliefs does he hold that are outside those dictated by his culture?
    1. What are these beliefs?
    2. How do they affect him and those around him?
  - D. Does he view his culture with favor or disfavor?
    1. Why?
    2. How do his views affect his relationships with others?
    3. Is his culture a majority one or a minority one?
      - a) How are its values different from those of other cultures with which he comes into contact?
      - b) How are its values similar to those of other cultures with which he's familiar?
      - c) How does he view those of different cultures?
      - d) In what ways does he more reflect values outside his own culture than those within it?
  - A. Is he still closely bound to his original culture (or cultures)?
    1. Does his original culture still exist intact anyplace in the world?
    2. Does it exert strong influences on many of those who were born into it?
    3. Is it a culture that emphasizes values, or action, or acquisition?
    4. How?
- II. What is his educational background?
  - A. Is it similar to that of others in his family or group?
  - B. It is acceptable to those of his culture?
  - C. What values did or does his educational process emphasize?
  - D. What values did or does his educational process disparage?
  - E. How does he apply his education?
    1. How does it hinder him or others?
    2. How does it benefit others?

3. How does it benefit him?
- IV. What religion or spiritual belief system does he follow?
  - A. How do his spiritual beliefs tie into his cultural and educational heritages?
  - B. What specific beliefs or values does he hold most dear?
    1. Why does he value them?
    2. How does this affect those around him, both those who do and those who don't share these beliefs?
  - C. What beliefs or values does he reject?
    1. How does his rejection affect those around him?
    2. Why does he reject them?
  - D. With whom does he willingly share his beliefs?
    1. Why?
  - E. From whom does he hide them?
    1. Why?
  - F. Have his beliefs ever been challenged?
    1. How did he face the challenge?
    2. By whom, and why?
    3. What was the outcome?

Here are a couple of my answers:

**I. From what ethnic or cultural heritage does your character come?**

Mary is a middle-American of Midwest origins. She still maintains close ties to her culture, from annual family reunions with the inevitable three-bean and Jello salads and grilled hot dogs and hamburgers, to four-times-a-year church attendance (she's Methodist), to visiting neighbors and baking things for new folks moving in, to hiding Easter eggs on the lawn and sending out Christmas cards each year.

**II. Are his family members still bound to their culture?**

Yes. Her brothers work on their own cars and run a small auto shop together; they are prototypical American small business owners—active in their community, concerned about the world at large. They donate to charities, sponsor kids overseas, have wives and children and homes.

Mary's mother and her third husband are regular churchgoers, proud of their children and grandchildren, deeply immersed in their community and especially their neighborhood.

## *Create A Character Clinic*

They all believe that God helps those who help themselves (but that charity is the heart of humanity), that hard work is rewarded, that persistence can overcome almost every obstacle, and that the man who will not help his fellow man is not a man at all. They believe in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the pursuit of happiness, and getting up early in the morning and going to bed at a reasonable hour each night.

### **III. What celebrations does he observe that set him outside of the norm?**

Mary doesn't. Though when she was younger she challenged her culture vigorously and extensively, she found that its values held, and she has embraced them and is passing them on to her own children. Though she is accepting of other cultures, she does not feel a need to live outside of her own.

I chose to make Mary from the middle-American culture, because most people don't even realize it **is** a culture. The middle-class American is frequently portrayed as existing within a cultural vacuum, when in fact middle-American values are rich and encompassing and deeply held.

There are a lot of folks who don't like middle-American values, (and a lot more who don't mind them but don't hold them) but in no way can this culture be dismissed from consideration. While a lot of middle Americans are moving away from their birth culture, a lot more still hold onto it and all it stands for.

Be willing, when looking at your characters, to question cultural and educational stereotypes and to acknowledge the validity and worth of currently unvalued and disliked cultures. There are always groups that are popular in the media, as well as groups that are reviled, but the world is much broader, deeper, and more interesting than the folks who declare who's "in" and who's "out" would have you believe.

### **EXERCISE: Culture, Education and Religion**

Your turn. Do a few questions from Culture, Education and Religion. Take your time, figure out what really matters to them.

## **C H A R A C T E R   T H R O U G H   M O R A L S T A N C E**

### How They Choose Right From Wrong

Moral stance is how your character behaves when he knows he won't get caught. It's how he acts when he has to risk himself in some way for the benefit of others. It's how he acts when he sees an opportunity for gain, or the chance to hurt without reprisal someone he hates.

In a lot of quarters, even suggesting that moral stance should be a consideration in your development of your character is met with scorn and derision. Moral relativists, and there are a lot of them, insist that their own actions and the actions of others are neither moral nor immoral, neither good nor evil—that everything has to be judged within some abstract framework in which all (approved) points of view are held to be equally relevant, and all actions equally acceptable, deserving of neither blame nor praise.

However, if you take this tack, you won't have a story. You can have a lot of words on a page, but, as I noted in a longish (and I hope, funny) essay titled *How to Write Suckitudinous Fiction* (<http://hollylisle.com/fm/Workshops/suckitudinous.html>) writing fiction is by its nature a moral exercise, in that to successfully tell a story, you have to choose sides. You have to convince a reader to care about the outcome to one character at the expense of other characters, and to do that, you have to care yourself which characters succeed and which fail. You have to decide that one point of view is better than another, you

## *Create A Character Clinic*

have to create real obstacles for your characters to overcome, you have to pit ideas against ideas and actions against actions, and have some triumph and some fail.

While morality is rarely ever as simple as black and white, or pure good versus pure evil, it can't all be relegated to the realm of "it's all the same." If everything is all the same, then nothing matters.

If nothing matters—if all your characters' actions are pointless and all their lives are futile—who is going to wade through your prose to read about them?

Even if you've never picked sides before, you're going to need to pick them now.

To do that, you're going to need the same thing that has given birth to every philosophy and every religion and every science and pseudoscience since the dawn of time.

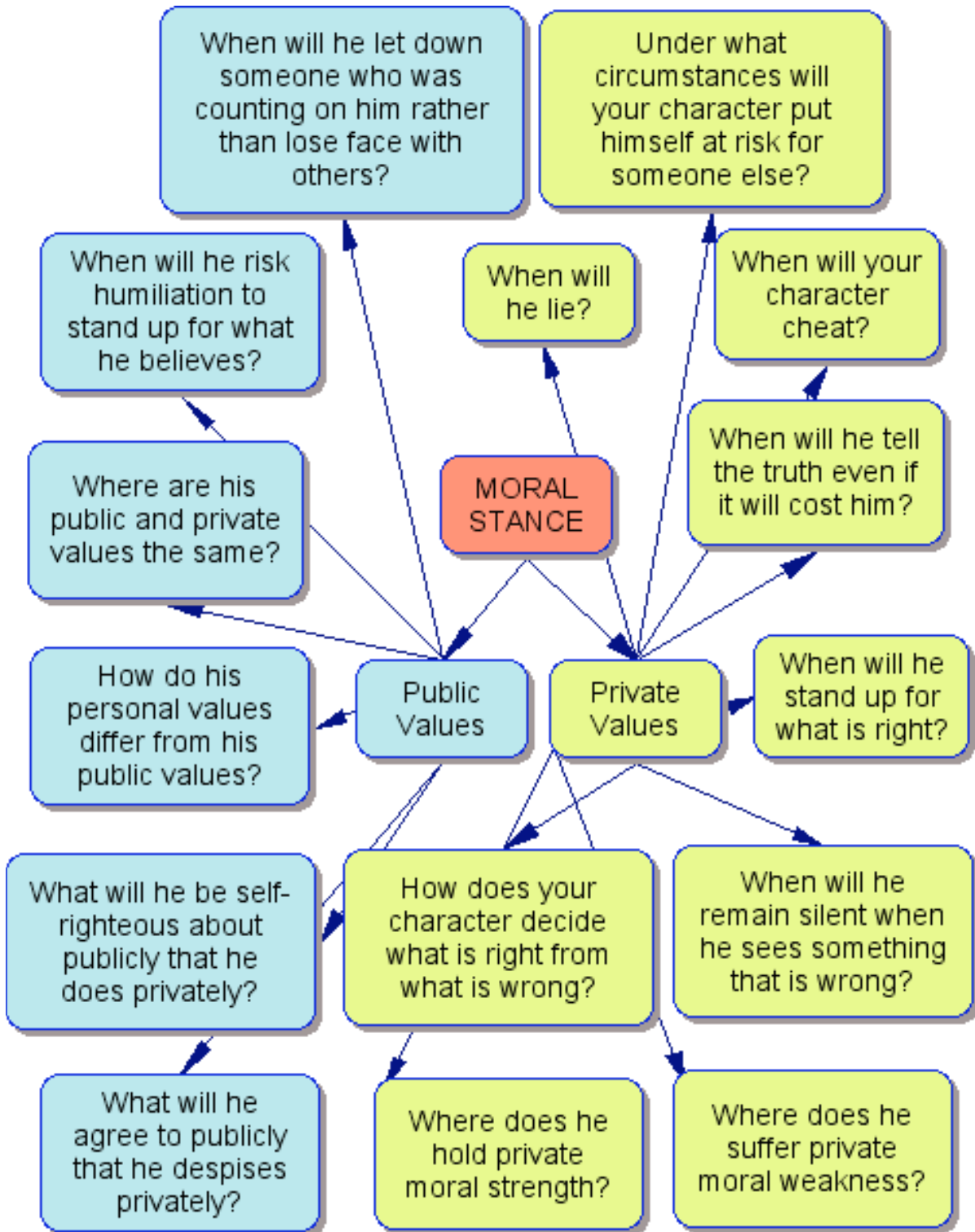
Questions.

Of course.

Here are a cluster of starter questions on moral stance. Remember when reading through these that the same questions will yield both heroes and villains, protagonists and antagonists.



Figure 10: **Moral Stance** Chart



## *Create A Character Clinic*

### **MORAL STANCE**

#### I. Private Values

- A. How does your character decide what is right from what is wrong?
- B. Under what circumstances will your character put himself at risk for someone else?
- C. When will your character cheat?
- D. When will he lie?
- E. When will he tell the truth even if it will cost him?
- F. When will he stand up for what is right?
- G. When will he remain silent when he sees something that is wrong?
- H. Where does he suffer private moral weakness?
- I. Where does he hold private moral strength?

#### II. Public Values

- A. How do his personal values differ from his public values?
- B. What will he agree to publicly that he despises privately?
- C. What will he be self-righteous about publicly that he does privately?
- D. Where are his public and private values the same?
- E. When will he risk humiliation to stand up for what he believes?
- F. When will he let down someone who was counting on him rather than lose face with others?

These can be difficult questions to ask, especially when you like your character. It's often painful to think that your character isn't a moral paragon—but if he's a human being, he isn't. He may be better than

average, but he will still on occasion choose to do the wrong thing, or do the right thing for the wrong reason.

**I. How does your character decide what is right from what is wrong?**

Mary decides right and wrong based on who gets helped or hurt by an action, and how. For actions that don't hurt anyone, she will not go so far as to say that they are right, but won't classify them as wrong, either. She would lump corporate profit schemes that don't depend on defrauding the public or destroying segments of the country into this category.

For cases where inaction and action both yield harm, she'll dig into the situation and see what kind of harm, and to whom, will come from each possible path. If no action is taken, innocents will continued to be raped and murdered by the hundreds of thousands? If action is taken, murderers will be slaughtered remorselessly, and some unfortunate innocents will be caught in the crossfire and die? She will choose the second option as better than the first, because in the first option, only the innocent will die, while in the second, those causing harm will die, while most of the innocent will be protected.

She will give preference to the innocent over the guilty in every case, determining that there is no such thing as an innocent child-molester or child-murderer, rapist, or thrill-killer, and no such thing as a guilty infant or small child, and that the value of individual lives is not equal. A child is worth more than a serial-killer, and every attempt should be made to save the former, while none should be made to save the latter.

**II. Under what circumstances will your character put himself at risk for someone else?**

She will do anything to protect her children, including die for them. She will do what she can to protect others, so long as her actions will not leave her children orphans. She will take unpopular stands publicly and challenge authority so long as doing so will not deprive her of a way to feed and shelter her family.

**III. When will your character cheat?**

As infrequently as possible. She will avoid income misrepresentation on her taxes, but might hide books she hopes to buy behind other books in the hopes that they will still be in the bookstore later, when she has the money to pick them up.

## *Create A Character Clinic*

In the defense of her family, however, she will be fierce and pitiless, and if the situation offers no better alternatives, utterly amoral.

### **EXERCISE: Moral Stance**

Ask a few hard questions about your characters; when they will do right, when they will do wrong, and how what they do will differ from what they believe. Explore both their private and public moral stance, and how they differ.

And now the good news. You have all the questions and answers you need to begin writing fiction. It's time to move on. We're going to delve into finding a character's voice and then work on writing characters through exposition, dialogue, and action.

## **SECTION TWO: BRING THEM TO LIFE**

### **Developing What You've Discovered**

While you've answered a bunch of questions, and you most likely have the answers in a simple question and answer format, what you've done probably doesn't look like fiction yet.

Here is where we start forming the raw elements of questions and answers into a narrative that will become fiction.

We'll try out a few techniques that let you take the questions and answers you've worked with and discover how to incorporate them in your character's voice.

For the following exercise, you'll be writing in the first person, asking your character questions and listening to him talk to you.

Really.

Let me demonstrate.

## The First-Person Interview

I'll ask my character, Mary, "**Whom have you hurt in trying to solve your debt problem?**" And then I'll let her answer.

*Are you kidding? I haven't hurt anybody. I keep my worries to myself, I'm always bright and cheerful for the kids, I'm ...."*

*She breaks down crying.*

*"I'm hurting myself, I guess. I'm not sleeping well at night. I keep digging through these magazines that tell you how you can make a million dollars a year working at home. But it's nonsense, and I know it. And I keep thinking that if I just worked harder, my boss would notice how good I am for the business and give me a raise, but that isn't the way my company works. I'm not in line for a raise, I'm just a junior associate and raises go by date of hire—there are a list of people as long as your arm ahead of me. It was the only job I could get when Kenny died, and it isn't a very good one. But I just finally have been there long enough to qualify for health insurance. Only I still can't afford it, because if they take two-hundred dollars out of my paycheck every month, we won't make it."*

She could go on. I know about her step-father, and she wants to tell me about him. She wants to tell me about her brothers, who have offered her money to move back home; money she doesn't feel she can take because she knows they need it, and because she doesn't want to admit defeat by giving up on the house she and Kenny loved, and that she'll be abandoning if she moves.

But just from this short exercise, I've learned a lot about her situation that I didn't know before. I didn't realize she was looking seriously at those work-from-home ads. Or that she didn't have health insurance through her company.

**EXERCISE: First-Person Interview**

Your turn.

Ask your character his or her question. Then set a timer or check your clock, and for ten minutes, just let the character talk to you. See what interesting tidbits he throws your way.

## Examination by Setting

Next, we're going to get a feeling for character by setting. Your character is going to give you a guided tour of the place where he lives or works, telling you the details of it that are important to him.

Here's Mary again.

*It had the turret, you know, and the wrap-around porch. We both looked at it, and even though the place wasn't in good shape, we stood there with our hands locked together, grinning at each other like two fools, and at the same time, we said, "This one." So that's how we came to buy the place. We were crazy for that turret, and the first thing Kenny did was repair the steps so that we could get up there. And then he and I worked on the roof. God, that was scary—I mean, look at that pitch. And after we got the roof on, we started doing the walls, room by room, and rewiring everything. Well, he did the rewiring because he was good at that, and I helped with hanging the sheet rock, and holding tools for him, and fetching things."*

*She laughs. "It was fun. And it was all stuff we did together, so every time I look at that wall, where we didn't get to put the sheetrock back up, I remember sitting there with him, handing him the wire splicers and watching him putting everything together, and ...." She turns her head away. "This place is still a wreck, but it's us. Him and me, and the kids—they helped when they got home from school. It's our family, still echoing and banging around in here, being happy and without a care in the world. And if we don't have carpet or curtains or paint on the walls yet, we will. Because we're going to finish this place, the kids and me. For Kenny."*

I'd expected more detail about the way everything looked from her, actually. But she told me what was important to her, and if that wasn't the descriptive detail I'd intended to find out about, still, it mattered—and within the framework of the story, I'll be able to use parts of this over again.



**EXERCISE: Interview—Examination by Setting**

Your turn now. Turn your timer back on or look at your watch again, ask your character to tell you about the place where he lives (or works) and how it matters to him, and then write for ten minutes.

## Actions Speak Louder

Your character is doing something, and it's either something that he finds interesting, or something that he finds necessary. We're going to ask our characters what they're doing, and then stand back while they tell us.

Here's Mary, one more time.

*I'm darning socks and sewing up rips. Darning socks is probably my least favorite thing in the world, but things are so tight right now that we **don't** have the extra five bucks to buy a pack from Wal-Mart. I hate this. I don't mind the sewing so much. Letting out hems to get a few more months out of the kids shirts and pants is going to drive me crazy, though. And don't even get me started on them and the hand-me-downs.*

*But I haven't started sewing for them. You have to realize that I went to school in homemade clothes for years, and for years, the kids I went to school with were merciless. My mother was a pretty decent seamstress, but she bought fabric out of the bargain bins, which meant it was always either a horrible color, or a horrible pattern, or a horrible texture. Sometimes all three. I'd rather send them to school in hand-me-downs than in homemade stuff, because if I had to buy fabric, I'd have to get it from the bargain bins, too.*

This offers something intensely personal about her past, as well as how she is reacting to that past in her present. It demonstrates her thrift, as well as a certain doggedness of personality and industry that fits in with her cultural background. Some of it is new material, some of it is worked in from the questions I developed about her.

Overall, it will be useful to know when I write her, though it won't necessarily show up in the book.

**EXERCISE: Interview—Actions Speak Louder**

Now you. What is your character doing, and why? Ask him and find out. Give yourself ten minutes, keep your fingers moving, don't stop to correct spelling or go back and refine the grammar or anything else. Just write.

## Showing Character Through Exposition

You've had a chance to listen to your character's voice, to sit inside his head and let him talk straight to your fingers. You've done at least thirty minutes worth of work in the first person, and heard what your character has to say in his own words.

Now it's time to look at him through the outside, and to discuss and develop him in your words. We're going to explore our characters and all the questions and answers we have about them through the third person, and cover the three forms of writing that you'll use in just about every story you tell: Exposition, Dialogue, and Action.

Exposition is first. Third person exposition is where most writers start. Learning to do it without boring your readers to madness is an art (and one we'll be covering extensively in Section III). For right now, you don't have to worry about boring anyone. You're going to talk about your character as if you were describing him to a friend. Or if you're inclined to run on and on with this, as you are welcome to do, to someone you despise who has to go to the bathroom. Urgently.

For now, we're not going to worry about showing, about good writing, about anything except just telling the most important things you can think of about your character.

I'll be brief and merciful in describing Mary.

*Mary's had a rough time lately. Her husband died, and she and the kids are just barely scraping by. But the thing her friends are most worried about is what they're taking as her excessive paranoia.*

*Ever since Kenny was killed in the wreck, she's been shoring up the house as if she thought she was going to have to defend it from invaders. She's purchased better locks for the doors, and at night she has brackets and bars she's put in place so that even people who manage to unlock the locks still won't be able to get in. She's come up with all sorts of arcane ways of making the downstairs windows impregnable. She won't answer the phone if she doesn't know the*

Holly Lisle

*person on the other end. She acts funny every time she opens her rural mailbox.*

*She tells them she's been having bad dreams about her stepfather, and they sort of understand that, because if anyone had reason to hate the man, it's her. But ... dreams? She's driving herself crazy because of dreams. She walks each kid to his school bus every morning. She's been to the school to make sure that they never, ever let her kids go with anyone but her, under any excuse at all. She drops by one of the other of her kid's schools during her lunch break, just to make sure they're all right.*

*Her friends are pretty sure she's coming apart at the seams. They have no idea how justified her actions are.*

This isn't presentable as fiction. It's in the present tense, for one thing, and present-tense fiction is a nightmare to sell. It tells rather than showing, for another. But it does give me as the writer useful information in a form that hadn't existed before.

### **EXERCISE: Character Through Exposition**

Ten minutes or more. You, your timer, and everything you want to interest a friend or bore an enemy with about your character. Go.

## Showing Character Through Dialogue

We've done a bit of exposition.

Now we'll move on to dialogue, this time in the form of you eavesdropping on your character talking to someone else. For now, don't worry about character tags, about adding in action with your dialogue, about avoiding talking heads. Just figure out who it is that your character is talking to, and why. Here's a demonstration.

*I'm applying for the job you have advertised in the window.*

*I'm looking over your resume, and you look overqualified. Frankly, you look overqualified for the job you already have. You have a bachelor's degree, you have some work experience. You have a large gap in your employment history, though.*

*I quit my job to stay home with my kids; I did that exclusively until my husband died in a car accident.*

*Yes. Well. We've had an unfortunate experience with single parents as employees, Ms. Baker. We've found that, while they're quite reliable about showing up on days when their children are well, they're terribly unreliable about showing up when schools are on holiday, or when their children are sick, or when there's some problem with the child and the school. Or on weekends. Or night shifts. We're open until 11 p.m., we don't play favorites with our employees, and if we hired you, you would be working some evenings. What sort of arrangements do you have for the care of your children when you aren't there? We've found that parents who leave the children home to take care of themselves spend an inordinate amount of time on the phone, and we restrict telephone usage.*

*I see. Well, thank you for your time.*

*You've decided not to apply?*

*Holly Lisle*

*I don't need this job that badly.*

*Well, that certainly is your decision.*

You find out things you need to know about Mary's job hunt and some of the obstacles she's facing. It's a pretty simple scene, but even this little start allowed me to see from the outside how she reacts with other people, and how they act toward her.

### **EXERCISE: Character Through Dialogue**

Pick the person your character will be speaking with, and choose one of the problems he faces from any section of your questions and answers. Have the two of them be on opposite sides of a situation that arises from your answer. Ten minutes. No quotation marks, no tags (he said, she said), no facial expressions or body movements or activities going on. Just two voices you hear as if they were in another room.

## Showing Character Through Action

After exposition and dialogue, we have action.

Once again, we're going to pull a problem out of our questions and answers, and we're going to run with it in a stark, no-frills fashion, simply to block out action. We will not be including dialogue, we will not be describing characters or scenes, we will not be providing backstory through exposition.

This scene will be all expository action, (not putting ourselves in the scene, but standing outside of it and figuring out what the scene will contain). We aim to learn what the character will do under the pressure of a given situation.

I'll demonstrate with Mary.

*Clock on the wall shows five p.m., and Elly should have been home by four. Four-thirty at the latest.*

*Mary gathers up the other kids, questions them about any plans that Elly might have had, gets from them that she had mentioned a boy she liked, but that they weren't supposed to tell. Mary gets the boy's name, goes through the phone book looking for matching last names, and starts calling any that match, asking if the boy is home. After every call, she waits a minute, giving Elly a chance to call her, but she gets increasingly frantic, and by 6 p.m., she is ready to call the police. At which point Elly walks through the front door with a girlfriend who talked her into dropping by to see her new horse; the two of them then walked the two miles from the friend's home to Elly's. Elly, who has never pulled this stunt before, did not expect the level of frantic activity that she encountered on walking through the door. She knows she's in trouble the second she sees her mother's face.*



What we don't discuss here is why Elly's mother reacts like a crazy woman with her daughter. We haven't looked at the daughter's age or level of responsibility, we haven't looked at Mary's past and motivations, we haven't looked at her technique in grilling the younger children. All we have done is block out problem, actions, and reactions in third-person, present tense—the same voice you'll use when writing synopses for editors and agents. This exercise, in fact, will help you prepare to write such a synopsis.

### **EXERCISE: Character Through Action**

Ten minutes, one scene, every bit of action and reaction that you can wring out of it. Don't waste time on fine detail—simply slap the main points of the action down on the page one after the other. You can go back later and figure out why. For now, you just want the action to be compelling and you want to have something important change within the scene.

And now it's time to move on. You have a significant amount of background on your character, you have heard your character's voice and seen him in action. It's time to actually write some fiction—and to discover how to identify the many sins of characterization, and to learn how to commit them right.

## **SECTION THREE: THE SINS OF CHARACTERIZATION, AND HOW TO COMMIT THEM RIGHT**

As you learned in the first two parts of this book, you characterize in three distinct ways—through Exposition, Dialogue, Action.

This section of the book is divided into **Sins of Exposition**, **Sins of Dialogue**, and **Sins of Action**, with individual sins listed in each section. For each individual sin, you'll find its description; a demonstration of how to commit it badly; the way this sin can be made into a useful addition to your list of writing tricks and techniques; a small excerpt from something I've published in which I have committed this sin (if one is available); and, of course, an exercise that will let you practice committing it well yourself.

## **THE SINS OF EXPOSITION**

Ready? Then let's jump into the **Sins of Exposition**.

### **The Core Dump**

**core dump**, also *expository lump*, *exposition hell*, *death to all readers*: All the author's research crammed onto a page or ten of mind-numbing detail so it won't go to waste. A core dump does not move the story forward, and frequently fails to even include the characters.

**This is what a core dump looks like.**

*Mary Baker always kept cheerful for the kids, but inside, she was frantic. Ever since her husband Kenny died, she'd been struggling to make ends meet while taking care of four small children and a rambling, falling-down Victorian house that she inherited when he died. She worried about finding good work, and about being there for the kids, and about making ends meet ....*

And so on.

Core dumps are dull to read. They tell us something instead of showing us something, and as human beings, we refuse to consider being told things entertaining.

We like to be shown.

## Create A Character Clinic

While there are times when you might want to rip through a whole lot of information in a very short space, those times are generally when you're developing a transition. Three years have passed, or we have gone from the character as a child to the character as an adult. Presenting your compelling need is unlikely to be done in a transitional situation. It's what at least the first part of your story is about. You want to show us the story.

Storytelling done well isn't exactly storytelling—it's more like **storyshowing**.

### **BUT WAIT ...**

Exposition doesn't have to land on our heads in lump-like form.

I'll offer a demonstration.

In this section from *LAST GIRL DANCING*, I introduce the main character, Jess Brubaker, and start the reader toward discovering her compelling need. This is exposition, but not expository. I am showing you who Jess is. I'm not telling you what she needs.

*Heading up the back steps of the Special Crimes building, Jess felt like she was walking into a cathedral. She was on her way to the home of the Grand Old Men of Murder.*

*For the last eleven years, her goal had been to become one of the Grand Old Men, not all of whom were old, not all of whom were men. Because what all the Grand Old Men had in common was that they were the best. They got the toughest, most baffling, most frustrating cases. They got the murders no one else could solve. Becoming an HSCU detective touched at the very heart of the reason she had become a cop.*

*Jess knew her chance of reaching her goal was better than the odds of winning the jackpot in the state lottery, should she ever decide to play. But not much.*

*HSCU consisted of twenty detectives, two lieutenants, and one captain in charge of the unit. You had to have already been the best just to get a chance to apply. The waiting list stretched on forever.*

*And yet Jess had received word the night before that she was going to be on loan from her own Major Crimes' robbery unit, and that she would be reporting to HSCU for as long as she was needed, starting first thing next morning.*

Joining this elite detective unit is not, in fact, her compelling need. Not even close. I'll start to hint at that at the very end of the chapter, and won't reveal the depth of the need that drives her for more than a hundred pages. What I've presented for the reader in the second scene of the book, however, is **one of the steps that Jess is taking** to meet her compelling need—steps that have turned her life completely upside down.

I've presented it as action, albeit action of a mild sort. She's walking up stairs into a building, she's going to meet people who are going to give her an assignment she knows nothing about. She isn't getting what we discover she wants in sentence number three—she's simply on loan, and she doesn't know why.

## **EXERCISE: Core Dump**

You're going to write an expository scene. If you haven't yet answered the question "How does the character plan to meet this need?" do that now. If you have, you're ready.

Choose a place where your character can be going, or a thing that he can be doing. It does not need to be related to his compelling need—in fact, you can disguise his real need from the reader for quite some time by presenting one of the more interesting steps he's trying to carry out as his compelling need.

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And the reason you disguise the compelling need from the reader is to allow the reader to discover the character gradually, and come to care about his big needs by seeing him struggling with little needs.

You have met people who, in the first ten minutes of your acquaintance, tell you about their three divorces, their struggle with jobs, their affair with the boss, and their embarrassing social faux pas when they got drunk at the office party last year and danced naked on the table. You have almost certainly recoiled because it is too much information, too fast. You might have been friends if these folks had let you get to know them a little at a time.

Same deal with your characters. We will recoil from the character whose massive central need and reason for being lies raw and naked and desperate on page one. Give it time.

Ready, then?

With an activity picked out, with a place chosen, drop your character into it, and let us see him working toward some portion of the plan that he thinks will get him what he wants.

Be coy in doling out your information. Show us what he's doing, what he's thinking, what he's feeling. But don't tell us why. Not yet. **Why** is the treat we reserve for the reader who comes to love the character and cares about seeing the character win his most important battles.

Run for one page, a couple hundred words, or a bit more if you find yourself on a roll. Come back when you're done, and we'll go to another way that you can begin revealing compelling need.

## Dust and Cobwebs

**dust and cobwebs:** in characterization, long, tedious sections focused on itemizing a character's description, belongings, surroundings, and so on. The reader who perseveres and wades through this crud is covered with dust and cobwebs at the end of the section.

Here's an example of **Dust and Cobwebs** in action—or lack of action, as the case may be.

*Elisha stepped into the room, and all eyes turned to her. She was tall and slender, with hair as black as coal and eyes like hyacinths. Her pert, upturned nose and full lips caught the attention of every man, as did her heavy breasts and tiny waist. Her legs were long and tautly muscular, but sleek, showed off perfectly by her pleated silk Ralph Lauren mini-skirt and ankle-strapped six-inch black-patent-leather open-toed heels. Her blouse was translucent raw silk in the palest shade of cream, with ivory buttons, and she'd left the top three unbuttoned. She wore three rings on each finger, all in silver, and all hand-crafted by her favorite jeweler from Manhattan, and a strand of matched black pearls around her delicate, swan-like neck, that she'd knotted half-way down, letting the remainder disappear into her cleavage. The bag she carried was a Donatello original, black patent leather with a hammered-silver clasp in the shape of a turtle, studded with diamonds and inset with black pearls. She'd taken time with her makeup—Adrian Arpel, all of it—she wore Blushing Rose and Creamy Barfing Puke-Pale Foundation ....*

Er ... sorry about that. Anybody besides me want to kill Elisha?

In almost every case, this is too much information. It's great that you know all these things about your character, and some of them, like Elisha's (take your pick—overpriced Italian designer or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle) handbag can certainly be telling characterizations. But, really, your readers can comfortably hold about four items in a list in our

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heads at any given time. In most instances, give us the three or four most compelling things about your character's

- appearance
- surroundings
- possessions

and then move on.

**HOWEVER** ... (yeah, you knew that was coming) there are times when an abundance of detail can provide atmosphere and scene-setting and characterization and even a bit of action, and when detail piled on detail is exactly the right approach.

*The corpse's left eye squinted at me from mere centimeters away. Decomposition lent her face an increasingly inscrutable expression; the first time I'd regained consciousness, when I found myself tied to her, she looked like she had died in terror. After a while, she started leering at me, as if she had reached the place where I was going and took perverse pleasure from the thought that I would join her there soon. Now, having had her moment of amusement at my expense, she meditated; beneath thousands of dainty auburn braids, her face hung slack, bloated and discolored, the skin loosening. Threads of drool hung spiderwebbish from her gaping mouth. Her eyes, dry and sunken and filmed over beneath swollen lids, still stared directly at me.*

*For a while, when I'd been hallucinating, the corpse had talked to me. She'd whispered that they would come back and throw me out an airlock, into the hard vacuum of deep space; that my vile mother was stalking me; that I could never run hard enough or far enough to find freedom—that death would be my only freedom. But my mind was clear now. No hallucinations. No talking corpses. Just me and horrible pain and aching, tantalizing thirst and a stench that even several days of acclimatization couldn't minimize; the stink of decomposition, of piss and shit, of the gangrene that I suspected was starting in on my right leg. Me ... and all of that ... and the body of*



Holly Lisle

*the young woman who had waited on me during my business dinner with Peter Crane in the members-only club **Ferlingetta**.*

(from **Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**)

In this case, I started a novel with a whole section of **Dust and Cobwebs**, and generally speaking, that's a bad idea. However, the main character is welded into a locker with a corpse, and she isn't going anywhere for a while, so starting out with the description of the corpse worked for me.

The time when details, and lots of them, will give you bang for your buck is when you aren't offering a stuffy list, but instead presenting these details in the middle of action (dialogue, not so much, but rules are made to be broken) and when you are demonstrating some sort of disconnect that will take the reader by surprise. In **Hunting the Corrigan's Blood**, there are two disconnects. The first is the presence of the corpse for what is clearly a lengthy amount of time in close proximity with the hero, and the second is the fact that the hero (or heroine, if you prefer) is fading in and out of some deeply disconcerting hallucinations.

**Dust and Cobwebs** works well when hitting the reader with people who are:

- crazy
- dangerous
- spooky
- offbeat
- in situations into which none of us would willingly step

### **EXERCISE: Dust and Cobwebs**

Do a minimum of two hundred words in which you demonstrate, by the use of **Dust and Cobwebs**, a character who is veering from the norm in some striking, compelling way. Use action, use dialogue, use listing, but

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pile on the details, and remember the disconnect—the place where you hit the readers discomfort by demonstrating how this person lives outside the norm.

## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

**mirror, mirror on the wall:** the point in a narrative where the author takes a painful, obvious, and tedious shortcut by having the hero look at himself in a mirror so the author can describe him to us. Also includes any other reflective or semi-reflective surface.

This is a cliché. It is a stinking, horrible, lazy, sloppy cliché, and in some cases, it is so painful it will cause readers to put the book down right there and never pick it up again. It shows up periodically in a lot of genres but with painful regularity in older romance novels (much more rarely in recent stuff). The character looks into a mirror/window/shiny pan and reflects on his reflection, and how imperfect it is to him—though he's more gorgeous than the rest of us combined.

*Missy caught a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror, and sighed with exasperation. Her waist was too small, her breasts too large, her legs too long, and her lips too full and pouty. Her thick blonde hair was tousled in a depressingly face-framing fashion, and she agonized that her eyes were the unfortunate blue of cornflowers, and not the more fetching green of emeralds.*

Riiiiight. Meanwhile the reader who has not flushed this book down the toilet in a frothing-at-the-mouth rage is muttering, “Die, bitch. Die.” Missy is going to get herself kicked upside the head, along with her clone Elisha from **Dust and Cobwebs**. Readers may have bought this “oh, poor me, I'm too beautiful” crap in ages past, but they aren't going to give you leeway now. We also don't want to watch women putting on their makeup while reflecting on their looks, or men shaving while bemoaning the cleft in their chin or the rugged angles of their jaws.

**HOWEVER ...**

There are times when looking in a mirror can be useful. I've done (and sold, and published, and didn't make my editor faint) a **Mirror, Mirror**. Twice, even. I'll show you one, and let you figure out what it is in this scene that made me decide to keep it rather than scrapping it.

*[Lauren] smiled at her childishness and liked the look of the smile on her reflected image. She couldn't resist a little primping—this particular mirror had always been fairly kind with the images it reflected, unlike the closet mirror in her old apartment, which had put twenty pounds on her and made her skin look green no matter the lighting or the time of day. She thought she still looked decent for her age. No gray in her hair yet, no real lines on her face—though she could see where she'd have crow's feet at the corners of her eyes in a few more years—and when she stood sideways, her stomach was flat enough and her butt still looked good in her jeans. The last year had been rough on the inside, but it hadn't done much to the outside.*

*She looked into her reflected eyes, and saw the faintest flash of green light shining back at her. Her heart skipped a beat, and she smiled nervously, and turned and looked down the hall to see where the light had come from. But the beveled glass sidelights to either side of the front door showed nothing unusual outside.*

*[Skipping a couple paragraphs, then ...]*

*No green light. She felt a slight stirring of the hairs at the back of her neck, and shivered. She turned around again, but averted her eyes from the mirror as she had done when she was a little girl ... and she caught herself doing it, and she shook her head, and forced herself to look in her reflection's eyes again.*

*Just a green flash. A spark, a sparkle, but it seemed to come from within the mirror.*

See why I kept it?

No? Here's why. Because the scene isn't about the character. It's about the mirror. And about the fact that there is something seriously, scarily, wickedly wrong with that mirror.

If you're going to have someone looking into a mirror, have them doing so for some reason other than as an excuse to describe the character to the reader. In mirrors, you can see:

- people behind you
- approaching danger
- ghosts, ghoulies and monsters
- things you weren't supposed to see, like the commission of a murder or the theft of something belonging to the character committed by someone the character trusted

Give your reader something to see in the mirror that surprises him, and not just your character's face. Or butt. Or whatever.

### **EXERCISE: Mirror, Mirror on the Wall**

Write two hundred words or more in which you have your character see something important in a reflective surface. Fish this important something from your background questions. If he accidentally notices three or four things about himself at the same time, you'll be forgiven, just as long as the other thing he saw there was worth seeing, and you don't make him freakin' perfect when he's looking at himself.

## Behemoth

**behemoth:** sentence of a hundred or more words that gives endless, tedious details of the character's life, possessions, perversions, hobbies, and favorite foods, and that requires chalkmarks, a length of sturdy twine, and a compass to parse clear through to the end.

I've read far too many writing books in which the authors expound on the glories of the hundred-plus-word sentence. The writer is advised to let himself run free and pile those words in, toss in piles of punctuation (but never a period), dance with verbosity in the name of style.

Argh.

Your point in telling a story is to tell the damned story—to communicate with your reader. Yes, you can write pages and pages of dense, period-less prose in which you ramble through the convolutions of your character's mind, or life, in stream-of-consciousness fashion.

You can.

I don't know that you **should**.

Here's an example of what a **Behemoth** looks like:

*Mary bit her lip and stared out the window; the rain drizzled and she had a hard time breathing, the day was so gray, and Susan hadn't called her back, and the job was falling apart—or maybe she was falling apart and the job would be fine for someone who wasn't a wreck; anyway, the room felt like it was closing in on her and she had nowhere to run, no one to talk to, nothing to do, and the clock was ticking ... ticking ... ticking so loud in the kitchen that it started to feel like it was ticking from inside her head, and why didn't Susan call, she'd said she would and she was usually so reliable, had she been in a wreck or was she having an affair on her lunch hour or was she just*

*starting to look at her friendship with Mary as a burden like the dead albatross around the neck of that sailor that was in the poem with the name Mary could never remember, so maybe Mary ought to take that as a hint that she ought to get out more and not worry so much about Susan and certainly she needed to be sure she wasn't clinging and acting desperate, even if she was desperate ... and why didn't the damned phone just ring?*

225 words. This is neither a particularly good or a particularly odious **Behemoth**. Depending on its context and how the rest of the chapter and scene are structured, it may work.

Yeah, I've written the occasional **Behemoth** in my own work, and generally it's in a situation like this, where I'm tight inside the head of a character who is in a dangerous or stressful situation. Overall, however, I detest wordy, breathless, self-indulgent prose. Don't like it when I read it; don't like it when I write it.

The **Behemoth** is—rarely—useful, and I'll have you do one to get a feel for running on. But be careful using this technique in real life. Readers thumbing through your books will subconsciously register the amount of left-edge white space—that is, the amount of dialogue and action versus monologue and description that you have in the book. The solidier and denser that left edge of your pages trends, the fewer readers will be willing to risk the book.

Drag out a **Behemoth** for:

- anxious introspection
- desperate danger
- the occasional mad chase scene
- **WITH EXTREME CAUTION:** in conjunction with **Dust and Cobwebs** for a stylized tour through a character's possessions or other listable part of your character background. (This can devolve into the **Core Dump from Hell**. Be very careful.)

## **EXERCISE: Behemoth**

Use some part of your character's background that suggests a high-stress situation to you, and write a **minimum** of a hundred words using any and every form of punctuation that does not bring the sentence to a full stop. No question mark, no period, no exclamation point. For the real masochists among you, break out your timer, and write without stopping (in any sense of the word) for ten minutes. This can be a liberating exercise, and in a loony, loopy way, it can be a hell of a lot of fun. This mad gallop through the world of alternative punctuation rarely results in an immediately usable first draft, however. When you're finished, go back and revise.

Extra points for reading your sentence aloud when you finish it and not passing out from lack of oxygen before you hit the end. And a hint: when your lips start turning blue while reading, add more punctuation, preferably a couple of lines back.



## Superman vs. The Gremlin

**Superman\*** vs. **The Gremlin\*\***: the presentation of a protagonist who is nothing short of bulletproof, handsome, virtuous, brilliant perfection in an inhumanly human form, who is pitted against an antagonist who is characterized by madness, deformity, villainy, and all-around wretchedness. Or the reverse.

This is the sort of thing that used to be common in comic books. The early Superman, who never suffered a temptation or faltered in his quest for Truth, Justice, and the American Way, faced villains with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. The Gremlin, who had no redeeming qualities whatsoever, faced a much more empathetic hero in the Hulk, but was pretty one-dimensional himself.

When a lot of comics writers started writing illustrated novels (the **Dark Knight** series and the **Sandman** stuff represent two good entry points into quality writing and depth of character development), comics heroes started developing scars and weaknesses, and villains began to become understandable and sometimes even partially sympathetic.

Committing a **Superman vs. The Gremlin** is pretty unforgivable. In almost every case, it demonstrates the writer's unwillingness to detach enough from the imagined perfection of the hero to give him human weakness, or to look into the dark side of himself deeply enough to give

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\* **Superman** is a copyrighted and trademarked character belonging to DC comics. You can find out more about him here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superman>

\*\* **The Gremlin** is a copyrighted and trademarked character belonging to Marvel Comics. He was an enemy of the Incredible Hulk, also a copyrighted and trademarked Marvel Comics character. You can find out more about him here: <http://www.incrediblehulk.com/gremlin.html> and [http://www.oafe.net/yo/hc2\\_mh.php](http://www.oafe.net/yo/hc2_mh.php)

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the villain human strengths. While modified **Superman vs. The Gremlin** approaches can work, (especially if the hero and villain roles are switched), they will only work if both characters reflect each other as mirror images, where one character's weakness is the other's strength.

### AND YET ...

Sometimes you need to be scary. Sometimes you need to be shocking. Sometimes you need to make things bad, and then worse, and when they seem to be as bad as they possibly can be, you need to make them even worse than that. And that was the situation I found myself in when introducing the immediately-visible villains in **Diplomacy of Wolves**. In one of the scarier scenes I've ever written, I brought in Crispin Sabir, who is a very bad man. And then Andrew Sabir, who is a worse man. And then, to demonstrate the price of magic in Matrin in a real and visceral way, I introduced Anwyn Sabir.

*The third set of footsteps on the stairs approached slowly. Marcue heard a hissing slide, then a thud and a grunt, then the normal click of bootheel on stone. A pause. Then the sequence repeated. Over and over, louder and louder. And throughout, a curious scraping that he hadn't heard at all until the other two men were off the stairs.*

*Marcue shivered, and not from the chill and the damp. He'd heard stories of the creatures the Wolves kept hidden in their chambers. He'd heard, too, that they consorted with demons and monsters. And that shuffle-step on the stair (what **was** that scratching sound?) might just be a kindly old Family diplomat limping down to tell the girl her ransom had been met ... but Marcue didn't think so.*

*"We have news for you, little Wolf," Andrew said.*

*Crispin glared at him. "Wait until Anwyn gets here. He doesn't want to miss this."*

*Andrew laughed, a creepy high tittering giggle that made Marcue want to retch. "News," he repeated. "But maybe Anwyn will want to give it to you himself. We'll all want to give it to you." He giggled again.*

*The girl stood and faced the men. She wasn't screaming any longer, and Marcue could see no sign of tears. She'd drawn strength from someplace; she'd found a measure of courage from deep inside herself; now her chin went up and her shoulders came back and her*

*body wrote defiance in the air with her every move. She glared at Andrew and said, “So what is your news, Wolf?”*

*Crispin and Andrew both grinned at each other. As they did, Anwyn slouched into the dungeon. Marcue had thought from his name that he would be human. Anwyn was a good Parmatian name, like Crispin ... or Marcue, for that matter. The thing that skulked into the dungeon wasn't human, though. He might have been one of the Scarred—one of the creatures from the poisoned lands whose ancestors, stories said, had once been men. If he was Scarred, however, he was from no realm that had ever traded in Calimekka. And if he wasn't one of the Scarred, then he was a demon from the lowest pit of Zagtasht's darkest hell. Long horns curled out from his forehead. His scaled brow beetled over eyes so deeply set they looked more like hollow sockets. His lips parted in a grin that revealed teeth long as a man's thumb and serrated like a shark's. He hunched forward, and Marcue could make out the ridge of huge spines that ran down the center of his back beneath his cloak. His hands were talons, though five-fingered, and while one of his feet fit in a man's boot and grew from a man-shaped leg, the other was a cloven hoof attached to a leg that, beneath a man's breeches, bent backward at the knee. That leg he dragged forward as he moved into the room.*

Anwyn does have a few (damned few) human and empathetic qualities, but this was not the place to show them, and I didn't. Instead, I let him be shocking.

However, I didn't let Anwyn be alone in his twisted, magic-induced strangeness. Both the hero and the heroine have been twisted by the same magic, and are equally scarred by it, and equally under sentence of death simply for existing, if ever they are discovered to be what they are.

Both the hero and the heroine of the book suffer from the same magic-induced compulsions and hungers as do Crispin and Anwyn. The differences in these people come not from external factors—their beauty or ugliness—but from internal factors: how each chooses to define responsibility and duty, how each chooses to value life.

You can do a **Superman vs. The Gremlin**, but if you do, keep in mind the following suggestions:

## *Create A Character Clinic*

- Find one way in which your protagonist shares the worst of your antagonist's qualities
- Find one way in which your antagonist shares the best of your protagonist's qualities
- Don't let appearance drive the character's actions—let who the character is and what the character believes do that
- Don't be afraid to make the good and the evil suffer equally

### **EXERCISE: Superman vs. The Gremlin**

Get your timer again, and for ten minutes, place your protagonist or antagonist in a situation where he faces a hellish challenge. Write him as an over-the-top version of himself—as someone without the flaws or virtues you have discovered in him and know to exist there. Allow him to be infallible, perfectly evil or perfectly good, totally one-sided.

When you're done, copy and paste your exercise into a new document, and edit it to add in the character flaws, the fears and hopes, the choices and beliefs that contradict the part of him shown in the first draft. Conflict him.

Compare the two versions.

For extra depth, do this same exercise with the character, either antagonist or protagonist, that you did not choose the first time.

## THE SINS OF DIALOGUE

### The As You Know, Bob

**as you know, Bob:** two characters telling each other what they both already know. The dialogue form of the **Core Dump**.

The **As You Know, Bob** is everywhere in amateur fiction, and shows up in an unfortunate amount of professional fiction as a writer's way of introducing the reader to the character's current job, recent history, lost love—anything that he or she wants to get on the page in a hurry. Also known as exposition disguised as dialogue, in its worst forms it's bad enough to make you want to shoot the characters.

Here's an example that I made up so I wouldn't be tempted to copy verbatim dialogue from one particularly awful section in a *New York Times* bestseller I just read.

The **As You Know, Bob** in action:

*Jennifer said, "I don't know how you're getting through the days, Mary, ever since your husband died. You have such a poorly-paid job, and those four small children to take care of. And that ramshackle house of yours is going to fall down around your ears if you don't find some way to make some more money. And with those strange notes you've been getting from the man who claims to be your stepfather, I don't know how you're even sleeping nights."*

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*"I know, Jennifer," Mary said. "As I told you before, we can't afford to move, or even to rent rooms in a hotel until this blows over. And I can't even quit my job, because I'm afraid I won't find another one, and the one I have isn't good enough. You know how worried I am I can't afford health insurance for kids, and ..."*

I think the best you can do when reading dialogue like this is to run screaming into the next state. Or country. This is **horrible**. What, Mary doesn't know any of this stuff about herself? Really? Did she suffer brain damage or amnesia so that the speaker had to tell her this? Jennifer didn't remember all the things the two of them have clearly discussed before?

Argh. This is exposition disguised as dialogue of a particularly egregious sort. It's barely dialogue.

If you can tack the words "As you know, Bob," in front of a chunk of dialogue and discover that it is appropriate, you have committed an **As You Know, Bob**.

### **HOWEVER ...**

Believe it or not, there are a few situations where people actually do enumerate things that everyone present knows, or believes he knows. And in one of these situations, an **As You Know, Bob** could be a good way to get that information in front of the reader.

I did one myself in **Talyn**, which I think is the best book I've ever written, and I didn't feel guilty about it at all. Why not?

Because I put my characters into a situation where everything they had fought for and everything they had believed in for their entire lives was being torn away from them without any say-so on their parts. They were being sold out by the people who had power over them. They were sitting at a table, listing the wrongs that had been done them by higher-ups.

Ever heard anyone do that before? You probably have. And so have I. Nurses going over the gory details of one shared hell day in the ER and the supervisor who crapped out on them. Workers in the break room bitching one more time about the hours they've worked and the effort they put in off the clock and the way their promised raises vanished into the ether after all of it. Soldiers in a battlefield bitching about the officers living in comfort well away from the action to which they have committed their troops.

These are people who have all been there. They've all suffered together. And by repeating the things they've shared, they solidify their bonds with each other and establish their separation from their common enemy.

Here's my **As You Know, Bob**:

*The serving girl left again, and I said, "Pig-balls. Not even the Feegash could untangle our war, nor would they try."*

*Pada agreed. "The disputed High Valleys and all the riches they contain remain disputed, and Whayre Harbor sits idle, with the richest fishing and the best trade routes blocked and under attack."*

*I nodded. "And how do we reach settlement, when we are free, while the Eastils have their pissless agglomeration of a republic where the few speak for the many and not a city or town can raise its own army or mint its own coin or field its own defenses, and where the money flows to king and court and damned little flows back? Are the Eastils suddenly come to reason, to disband their republic and their monarchy? Or are we expected to bow, who have not bowed to man or god in our lives?"*

*Karl said, "I don't know how it's to be done. I don't know what they're saying, or what they're planning, but I know at least some of the rumors are true. My brother Borin came in from the front lines today, and told me the Feegash observers are supposed to be arriving on the morrow, with the first light. They're to be on both sides of the line. They will offer themselves hostage to the cease-fire while their negotiators work out the details."*

## *Create A Character Clinic*

The **As You Know, Bob** is useful for allowing characters to:

- define common ground
- determine how two or more allies differ from a shared enemy
- allow two people to enumerate each other's sins in the middle of a fight
- in other ways revisit a shared experience, whether negative or positive, for the purposes of either bringing everyone together or driving them apart

### **EXERCISE: The As You Know, Bob**

Your job is to write an **As You Know, Bob** that won't make the reader throw your story across the room.

Break out the timer, figure out who you have talking and whether their conflict concerns absent third party or each other, and then jump in and start writing. Ten minutes, no stopping, no editing. You may write with dialogue tags and narrative action and description in your first draft, or simply do the bare-bones dialogue without any of that, going back to add in the other elements in your second draft.



## Headless Horsemen

**headless horsemen:** stretches of tagless, actionless dialogue that give us no view of the speakers or connection to who says what, or any look into what they're doing while they're speaking

It's absolutely true that dialogue should be strong enough to stand on its own—that it should make compelling reading simply based on the information the writer is conveying. However, the framework of a house has to be strong enough to hold up the house, but when you have the framework, you still don't have a house you can live in.

Same with dialogue. Here are some **Headless Horsemen**.

*"Christ, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention. Are you hurt?"*

*"I'll be fine. You're the guy next door. The doctor."*

*"Alan MacKerrie. Sorry to meet you this way. If you were going to get pasted on the sidewalk, I guess you got pasted by the right guy. So where do you hurt?"*

*"My butt. My knee. The palms of my hands."*

*"Any pain in your wrists?"*

*"They're fine. My knee's the only thing that really hurts, and it already hurt."*

*"You feel a pop or a snap when you fell?"*

*"No. The pain just got worse, but it was already pretty bad."*

*"Let me take a look, okay?"*

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*"I'd ... rather you .... Sure. Take a look. I don't think it's any worse than it was, but if it is, I'd rather know now."*

*"What happened?"*

*"Shotgun. I've had a bit of work done on it."*

*"I see that. I don't see any new damage, but if you want, I'll take you to the ER and get it x-rayed for you. I'll cover the cost—I did knock you down."*

That gives you some information. It tells you things you need to know. However, remember **storyshowing**? Even dialogue needs to show the story, to bring the reader right into it.

Here's the full version of this piece of dialogue, excerpted from **Midnight Rain**:

*She went over backwards with a cry of pain, and his first ungallant thought was, **Shit, my malpractice insurance**. But he dropped to one knee beside her. "Christ, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention. Are you hurt?"*

*She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath, and with her eyes still closed, said, "I'll be fine." She looked at him then, and he saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes—and she managed a strained smile. "You're the guy next door. The doctor."*

*He nodded. "Alan MacKerrie. Sorry to meet you this way."*

*Her pained smile got a little broader, but he noticed that she did not offer her name.*

*"If you were going to get pasted on the sidewalk, I guess you got pasted by the right guy." She was pretty in a delicate, underfed sort of way. Long, curly dark hair worn loose, large dark eyes, a pointed chin, the undeveloped build of a teenager who might one day fill out and be gorgeous – but this girl wasn't a teenager, he realized. If he*

*looked at the first ghosts of smile lines in the corners of her eyes, he'd have to guess early thirties.*

*He'd only seen her in passing before and had never paid much attention – most too-thin women never showed up on his radar. "So where do you hurt?"*

*"My butt. My knee. The palms of my hands." She held them up and looked at them. Dirt embedded in the skin, a few scrapes and flecks of blood, nothing major.*

*"Any pain in your wrists?"*

*She wiggled them. "They're fine. My knee's the only thing that really hurts, and it already hurt."*

*"You feel a pop or a snap when you fell?"*

*"No. The pain just got worse, but it was already pretty bad."*

*"Let me take a look, okay?"*

*"I'd . . . rather you . . ." She sighed and shrugged. "Sure. Take a look. I don't think it's any worse than it was, but if it is, I'd rather know now." She tugged up the leg of her jeans, and for an instant he thought she had really pretty legs, which made up for the flat chest, and then he saw the scar tissue and it was everything he could do to keep the shock from showing on his face.*

*He put his hands on either side of the knee and made a production of palpating and gently moving the joint to hide his reaction. Her right knee bore the branding of half a dozen surgeries; the square outlines of two grafts, one white and relatively old, the other pink and a bit puffy; a dozen black circles tattooed into the skin and grown over; a missing chunk that had healed hard and red and ugly. "What happened?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral and not looking at her face.*

*"Shotgun." He looked into her eyes and saw a wall so solid no emotion leaked past. She said, "I've had a bit of work done on it."*

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*"I see that." He said, "I don't see any new damage, but if you want, I'll take you to the ER and get it x-rayed for you. I'll cover the cost—I did knock you down."*

See how much your reader misses when you pull a **Headless Horsemen**?

### AND YET ...

There are times when you want to offer your readers little or no information about the speakers.

Imagine having a situation in which your protagonist, believing he is alone, begins to talk to himself in a locked, pitch-dark room, only to have a second voice answer? Limited input and the stress of the situation would make those **Headless Horsemen** great. Throw in the well-placed noise of feet trying to sneak or the rasp of heavy breathing, and you can take your reader straight out of his skin. Other instances where the **Headless Horsemen** can ride:

- Short bursts of fast-paced give-and-take, where the speakers are escaping/chasing someone or breaking into/breaking out of someplace
- Arguments and fights, where cross-talk, interruptions, and the shouting of invective can show a great deal
- Humorous/smartass backtalk, where sheer wittiness won't need props
- Places where you briefly want to leave your reader in the dark about who is involved in a situation (for example, when the overheard voices are in another room, eavesdropped on by a third party listening in to a phone call, etc.)
- **USE WITH EXTREME CAUTION:** Places where you want to create a deliberate misunderstanding (for example, he thinks she's pregnant, while what she was really talking about was

someone **else's** baby)

NOTE: This has been done so many times, and so badly, that it has become a cliché—a horrible, grotesque, terrible, awful cliché. Unless you have some fantastic new twist on it, don't go here. I feel guilty even mentioning it. You never saw it here. Close your eyes, erase it from your mind.

### **EXERCISE: Headless Horsemen**

Dig through your questions and answers, and find a situation where two characters could be in conflict, and where you could introduce fear, anxiety, confusion, or other good things (good from your story's perspective) by withholding information. Write for five or ten minutes at full tilt without including any of the usual tags and background that characterize good dialogue.

## Coffee and a Bagel

**coffee and a bagel:** dialogue that includes all the starting, stopping, hellos, goodbyes, weather, and extraneous chitchat

Let's start right off with a horrible example of **Coffee and a Bagel**.

*"Hi, Mary."*

*"Oh, hello, Bob. How's your back been?"*

*"Not so bad. You checked your mail yet today?"*

*Mary shrugged. "Haven't had the heart to go look. It's going to be bills."*

*"My Darcie got a free sample of a new dishwasher detergent. Told me she thought you'd like it. She said stop over if you didn't get one, too."*

*"I'll do that," Mary said.*

*Bob leaned against the fence and sipped his cup of tea. "Grass sure is growing fast this year."*

*"It is. And mowing it's such a bother. I wouldn't mind so much if the weather were cooler." Mary wiped beads of perspiration from her forehead.*

And on, and on. We've all had conversations that were as pointless as this one. Neither of these people is talking about anything that matters. They're simply chatting—this scene has no conflict, no purpose, and not much life. **Coffee and a Bagel**—it's all pleasant and friendly, but in the end, meaningless.

Now ... it doesn't have to be that way. If Mary knows that Bob is cheating on Darcie with the woman across the street; if Darcie is in the house at that moment making a Molotov cocktail with the detergent she just received; if Bob has a gun behind his back and is planning on shooting Mary because she did something to damage him (or he believes she did); if the **Coffee and a Bagel** chit-chat is just a cover for something big happening just beneath the surface or just behind the curtain, then suddenly the chit-chat itself can be tension-filled.

Done well, a **Coffee and a Bagel** scene can have your reader on the edge of his seat, screaming, “The gun! The gun! Look at the lump in his pocket he’s got a gun he’s going to kill you run run RUN!”

Done badly, of course, the scene might cause the same reader to end up wishing your villain would go after you.

**IMPORTANT POINT:** You have to let the reader **see** somehow that this conversation is not nearly as benign as it seems. You can do this by:

- having the scene follow one where we see suspicious or dangerous activity
- having it intercut with the scene where dangerous activity happens
- showing in the same scene that one of the characters is acting contrary to appearances—flash of gun in pocket, have thoughts that run in a different direction than words, etc.

**Coffee and a Bagel** is all about the storyshowing.

### **EXERCISE: Coffee and a Bagel**

Time. Ten minutes. Give yourself **Coffee and a Bagel** with something spicy hidden in with the normality. Use this as an opportunity to put one of your characters’ deep-seated conflicts into play, whether it’s a love-hate relationship that could go either way in this scene, two colleagues shooting the breeze while one has just pulled off the coup that will win him the corner office and see his erstwhile friend relegated to the downstairs cubicles, or two high school girls eating lunch while one keeps a stunning secret from the other.

## Seltzer

**seltzer**: dialogue that is all fizz. It has no point in being in the story except that the writer thought of something artsy or amusing to say, and decided to have the character say it for him.

Oh, **Seltzer**. It's the stuff you fall in love with. It sparkles, it shimmers, it tickles your nose and makes you laugh. It's beautiful, it's fun.

It won't carry the scene on its own.

Context is everything with **Seltzer**. If something critical happens in the scene (and something critical should happen in **every** scene) and if the **Seltzer** doesn't destroy the impact of that critical change, then your fun, fizzy stuff can stay. If you read it and it's just there because it looks pretty ... well ... you have two choices. One is toss it. The other is make something critical happen.

You'll see this bit of **Seltzer**, from **TALYN**, later in a longer clip from the same section of the story, which I've used to illustrate a completely different point. I want to include this short bit now because it's the part of that larger scene that I almost dumped—before I decided a bit of humor didn't hurt that scene after all.

*I could **see** the men at table around us, who were listening in on our conversation with less and less success at hiding the fact, thinking, 'Yes, oh, yes, put him aside, take me, take me, I'll lie in a puddle on the ground and you can walk on top of me to keep your shoes clean if you'll just take me,' and I swear on all the Saints the temptation to tell Pada, "If you would only stop pogging your horse, you would have an easier time with Dosil," almost got the better of me. If nothing else, I could have had a fine laugh watching that thought working its way through their brains—but then one of them would have run over and*



Holly Lisle

*begged her to let him watch, and I do not know that I would have been able to keep from killing him.*

*So I kept my mouth shut and let them all live, and Pada and I had a pleasant enough lunch.*

It was fun internal dialogue to write (internal dialogue is what the character says to himself instead of to others), and it's the sort of thing I sometimes think (and try not to say out loud), and your average writer enjoys including those little bits of personal opinion in works of fiction.

But.

It had only a tiny bit of relevance to the story as a whole. However, although that scene doesn't look like it, a couple of life-changing events happen right there, and that bit of fluff and fizz helped me to distract attention away from them, much as a magician waves a bunch of scarves around in one hand so that you don't see what the other hand is doing. It also shined a bit of light on Talyn's cattier and less gracious side, a side she and I happen to share.

And I made myself laugh when I wrote it.

## **EXERCISE: Seltzer**

Actually, there isn't an exercise for this one. **Seltzer** is the spontaneous stuff that fizzes from your brain down through your fingertips while you're ripping along at a good clip, and I have absolutely no talent whatsoever for writing it cold and with intent. So I won't ask you to, either. If you have a bit of your own **Seltzer** lying around, go back to it, look at it, and make sure that it's in a scene where something critical happens. If it isn't, find a way to put it in one.

## Elephant at the Tea Party

**elephant at the tea party:** Characters talking around and avoiding the primary issues and compelling needs.

At its worst, the **Elephant at the Tea Party** occurs when the writer has what we'll refer to (a fifth-grader's maturity) as a brain fart, and gets so sucked into his own dialogue that he forgets the Really Important Thing that was happening in his scene, leaving the reader gnashing his teeth and screaming, "Yes, all very nice, but what about the **elephant**, you idiot?"

As the writer, you would prefer not to have your reader shouting these sort of things about you.

So that you'll recognize rogue elephants when you see them (and can shoot them before they hurt anyone) here's an example of a very bad one.

Let's say that Mary has just found out that a Man of Questionable Character showed up at her house and was looking through her windows and trying to get in her doors. Her next-door neighbor has summoned the police, and she has been called home from work. The cop asks her:

*"Have you ever had any problems with prowlers before, ma'am?"*

*Mary looked around the her yard, and then at her beloved old ramshackle house. "No. Not that I know of, anyway."*

*The officer was watching what she looked at, she realized, for he said, "You've done a lot of work on this place. I remember when we were kids, we used to come by here and peek in the windows."*

*We scared ourselves thinking the place was haunted.” He chuckled.*

*“I did the same thing. So did my husband. But we fell in love with the house in spite of that. Or maybe because of it. The nineteenth-century details just sucked us in—crown moldings and coffered ceilings and all the exquisite bead-board chair rails and the wonderful hand-carved detailing on the stairways.”*

*“I totally understand,” the cop said. “My wife and I are rehabbing an old place like this. It doesn’t have a turret like yours, though. We’ve talked about adding one, even though it wouldn’t be quite historical.”*

*“Turrets are great. Come on in and take a look at mine. I’m hoping to use it as an office for a home business someday. Maybe you can get some ideas for yours.”*

First off, the writer here needs to lay off **Home and Garden Television Network** for a while.

But secondly, we’re sitting here wondering how they’re ignoring that elephant right in front of them. We’re screaming at the author, “What about the prowler, you idiot!”

You don’t want to do this to your reader.

**AND YET ...**

An **Elephant at the Tea Party** can be subtle, and nimble, and when it is, it offers as much by what it doesn’t say as by what it does.

Here’s my **Elephant at the Tea Party**—a snippet from TALYN that presents Talyn as she and her friend Pada are dealing with their abrupt and compelling need to choose a new path for their lives. They’ve both been to the temple to seek guidance from their saints, and the thing we expect to find out is which path Talyn has chosen for her life.

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*Pada waved me over to the little table with a broad smile. "It's to be Ethebet, not Minda, for me," she said. "I went first to Minda's shrine and closed my eyes and turned thrice before the wall, and with my left hand on the arch I put my right hand out, and when I opened my eyes I'd gotten 62."*

*Which would be at about shoulder height for Pada. Apparently, in Pada's search for her path, the Saints needed to be sure that they had nothing important to say that lay either toward the ceiling or the floor, or she would render them mute.*

*"And 62 is ...?" I asked.*

***"Veer not from your chosen path, neither left nor right, nor question where your path may lead, for that to which you have bound yourself may not be unbound."***

*Which if you ask me is a fine Meditation for a sheep, but a dreadful one for a human. Nevertheless, Minda's own words had cost her a follower. And she had done it by permitting that particular bit of thought to fall in the middle of a column. See what I mean about some who would do as well to throw darts at the wall? Religion should be a course of sober reflection and study and thought, but quite some few see it as nothing more than a lottery, and will happily base the course of their lives on a single throw of the dice.*

*"Very good. Of course, if Dosil gets that same Meditation, you may have difficulty getting him to convert to Ethebet's Law." Assuming we would be permitted to remain under Ethebet's Law—something I kept trying very hard to avoid considering.*

*Pada frowned, her eyebrows drawing in and her nose wrinkling. At the tables around us, I saw the men who had been surreptitiously watching her begin to gather themselves to come to her aid should she just give a sign what had disturbed her. I could be bleeding with a knife between my ribs and not draw such instant concern. It may seem that I speak from envy about this.*

*Well, I do.*

*"I think if he would not permit himself to live under Ethebet's ruling, even if he still followed Minda in his heart, I would put him aside and find another.*

*I could see the men at table around us, who were listening in on our conversation with less and less success at hiding the fact, thinking, 'Yes, oh, yes, put him aside, take me, take me, I'll lie in a puddle on the ground and you can walk on top of me to keep your shoes clean if you'll just take me,' and I swear on all the Saints the temptation to tell Pada, "If you would only stop poggging your horse, you would have an easier time with Dosil," almost got the better of me. If nothing else, I could have had a fine laugh watching that thought working its way through their brains—but then one of them would have run over and begged her to let him watch, and I do not know that I would have been able to keep from killing him.*

*So I kept my mouth shut and let them all live, and Pada and I had a pleasant enough lunch. Envy makes an interesting spice for steak and greens.*

This is a longish section, but I wanted to demonstrate how to bury compelling need inside dialogue and action (with a bit of exposition thrown in) and show that once again, the writing is only partially about the need itself. We see Pada telling Talyn how she chose her saint. But then we get Talyn's not entirely supportive reaction to this method, and Talyn's envious response to the male attention Pada garners for looking a bit distressed, and the dialogue that Talyn doesn't say out loud, which also circles around the periphery of the actual need.

You can use an **Elephant at the Tea Party** to:

- **Present characters who are keeping secrets from each other** and to encourage the reader to mistrust one or both of them
- **Show characters whose thoughts are far different than their words**, either to give your reader insight into who they really are, or just to add a bit of humor

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- **Create conflict** by having one character's need get derailed by another character's need, inattention, distraction, or intent
- **Crash compelling needs into each other** without allowing either to be resolved or even addressed at that time
- **Play with your reader's expectations**, taking the scene in a direction he doesn't expect

### **EXERCISE: Elephant at the Tea Party**

Either take dialogue that you have already written, or start with the information you've obtained from the questions you've answered here.

Move the setting for this dialogue to a new location, one that has nothing to do with your character's goal in the scene. Put your character with someone who isn't particularly interested in his problem, his need, his situation, because your second character has needs, too, and they aren't the same needs.

Put them in a slightly adversarial position to each other; perhaps each has something the other wants, but perhaps they don't like each other, or they love each other, or they're hiding secrets from each other.

Now, set them to talking. As above, play with what they're doing; with what the main character is thinking, with reactions of people around them, with lapses in communication.

Give yourself at least a full page, or about two-hundred words, to let one of the characters discuss how he is dealing with his issue. Let the other be more of a roadblock than a superhighway in regards to getting that information on the page.

Never, ever feel guilty about not giving the reader all the information at once. Or about being intentionally misleading. Don't lie, but be very happy to deemphasize important points while making a big deal out of non-issues on the way to revealing your characters' true needs and situations.

## **THE SINS OF ACTION**

Action is a tremendous way to present characterization. No dialogue is necessary, and if it's used, it rarely has anything directly to do with your character's compelling need. It may have a lot to do with meeting the compelling need, however.

You want a subtle effect with your action scenes. The funny thing about action is that you don't want to say in so many words what is at stake in your story. You know what it is, and you **SHOW** what it is, but you don't often **TELL** what it is.

The points of a bad action scene would be:

- **The dialogue runs in lockstep with the action**—the characters talk about what they are doing and why, while they are doing it
- **The stakes are blatantly stated**, either in the action or in the dialogue ... or if things have really gone down the toilet, both
- **Compelling need is defined** rather than hidden away and teased out over the course of time

Here's a made-up example of bad action—we'll go back to Mary and her problems with her life and hard times:

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*Mary hurried from door to door down the long street, walking into each business and requesting an application. She'd had enough of struggling against an uncaring system in a huge corporation. "I need a better job so I can take care of my kids and fix my house and my life," she told the woman at the White Line Print Shop, and, "I can't wait forever for a promotion," she told the man behind the counter at Latte Jim's.*

Boring, obvious, lame. She's job-hunting, she's talking about job-hunting, and she dumps her actions taken to meet her compelling need on us with no disguise, no dissembling, no subtlety at all.

A good action scene will use one of the plans you came up with for having your character meet his compelling need of the moment, but it will hide important facts from the reader, it will disguise the essential moment where you reveal what actually matters in the scene behind a smoke screen of other interesting action, it will move as sideways as a crab toward its eventual goal.

In **LAST GIRL DANCING**, my main character, Detective Jess Brubaker, agrees to go undercover as a stripper. I won't tell you why. But what **really** drives her is not the need presented in this scene. Her compelling need is never mentioned, and it's not directly shown. And yet, struggling for the courage to walk out of a bathroom into a room filled only with her male colleagues, she is doing exactly what she has to do to meet that secret, long-term compelling need.

*So Jess caught her breath.*

*I can do this, she told herself. I can do this better than anyone else could. I can do this because those dead girls need me. Because this isn't about me at all. It's about them, and about the job. The mission. About getting it done.*

*And the smile went back on her face, and this time her hand made it all the way to the doorknob and opened it, and she put on a dancer strut that came out of nowhere. She swung out into the room of*



*waiting men and did a little twirl like the one she'd seen one of the good dancers do on the runway the night before.*

*She heard the intakes of breath. From Charlie, "Omigawd." A low whistle from Jim.*

*Yes, she thought. I can do this.*

*And she came to rest facing her audience, and found Hank there with Charlie and Jim and Bill. Hank's eyes met hers, and she could see pain in there, coming from somewhere she couldn't go.*

*Inside she yelled at him, This isn't me. This isn't me. This is the job!*

*But she kept on smiling, and kept her strut, and did a little bow before walking over to get her picture taken. And pretended the wary, suspicious look on Hank's face didn't matter. Because this was the mission. And if she broke when her heart fell out of her chest onto the floor, when she wanted for reasons unknown to go over to a man she'd barely met and explain herself, she would not be able to trust herself to stay in character when the situation inside Goldcastle got uncomfortable, when she wanted to arrest someone rather than to smile and wink and move out of reach.*

*Jim looked at her and nodded. "I knew you were the right one for this, Gracie," he said. "I don't know how I knew it. But you have layers." He shook his head, and laughed ruefully. "Whole lotta goddamned layers."*

*"All of which are in that brown paper bag in the bathroom." She shivered, shedding her stripper persona at last. "And which of you bastards turned the air conditioning up? God, it's **cold** in here.*

Let's move on, then, to the crabwise ways of the action scene, and to the individual **Sins of Action**, and how to commit them both badly and well.

## The Ben Franklin

**the Ben Franklin:** action characterized by a mind-numbing dedication to the character's daily routine in step-by-step detail, from getting out of bed, to showering, shaving, and peeing, to getting ready for work, to eating and drinking, to going to work, sitting at work, coming home from work, drinking water, tea, or coffee, watching television, walking the dog, playing a video game, listening to the news, and finally going to bed at a sensible hour ("Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" ... [but not too interesting to read about])

Here's the **Ben Franklin** in action:

*Mary woke up unrested, and lay in bed staring at the ceiling. She thought about her nightmares, especially about the point where her stepfather had walked down the stairs into her basement and she realized she was back in the cage again. She thought she might have overslept; the light coming through the windows was wrong, too bright and too angled. Then of course, she realized that it was Saturday, and she didn't have to get up at any particular time.*

*She could hear the kids banging around downstairs, laughing and yelling. Ought to get up, she decided, and dragged herself wearily from the bed, and rummaged around in her drawers for comfortable jeans and a bra that didn't pinch. She went into the bathroom, peed, washed her hands, brushed her teeth, and then decided to take a shower. The kids could entertain themselves for a while.*

*She fiddled with the water temperature, resenting the fact that the kids had used most of the hot water. When she got in, though, she stayed, letting water pour onto her even once it got cold, trying as best she could to force herself to wake up. She got out of the shower, blow-dried her hair, and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt,*

*and padded down the stairs to see what trouble the kids had gotten into. They'd left messes, but had finished arguing and thumping around and had settled in front of the television set; so she cleaned the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher. While the dishes started washing, she made herself a cup of coffee, and sat down at the table. And she thought about her work, and about the work she needed to find.*

And she will go on.

And on.

Something may happen. Eventually. By the time Mary has finished the laundry, vacuumed the carpet, yelled at the kids, walked the dog, and made herself three more cups of coffee, (and run to the bathroom four more times, because all that caffeine is **hell** on your bladder,) who on Earth is still going to be around to care?

In almost every instance, the **Ben Franklin** is best solved by what is called a transitional sentence—something like this:

*Mary's Saturday started like all her Saturdays started—with bored, arguing kids and messes to clean up. It wasn't until she sat down to read the newspaper that she got the shock of her life ...*

That's not a great transitional sentence, except in comparison to the Ben Franklin that preceded it.

And yet ...

**AND YET ...**

There are times when step-by-step action is **exactly** the right approach. Let's take this last section about Mary, and revise it just the tiniest bit:

*Mary woke up unrested, and lay in bed staring at the ceiling. She thought about her nightmares, especially about the point where her stepfather had walked down the stairs into her basement and she realized she was back in the cage again. She thought she might have overslept; the light coming through the windows was wrong,*

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*too bright and too angled. Then of course, she realized that it was Saturday, and she didn't have to get up at any particular time.*

*She could hear the kids banging around downstairs, laughing and yelling. Ought to get up, she decided, and dragged herself wearily from the bed, and rummaged around in her drawers for comfortable jeans and a bra that didn't pinch. She went into the bathroom, peed, washed her hands, brushed her teeth, and then decided to take a shower. The kids could entertain themselves for a while.*

*She fiddled with the water temperature, resenting the fact that the kids had used most of the hot water. When she got in, though, she stayed, letting water pour onto her even once it got cold, trying as best she could to force herself to wake up. She got out of the shower, blow-dried her hair, and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, and padded down the stairs to see what trouble the kids had gotten into, and why they were being so quiet.*

*She wasn't prepared for what she saw.*

*The front door had been kicked in. Furniture was tipped, there was blood on the floor. And the kids were gone.*

See what I mean?

The **Ben Franklin Step-By-Step** is useful when you want to do nasty things to your reader. It's also useful in other ways. You pull it out of your bag of tricks (but don't overuse it) when you want to:

- **Establish a sense of normalcy** before pulling the rug out from under a character's life (and the reader's), as above
- **Introduce an unfamiliar job, time period, or world** by demonstrating the way in which a character accepts as routine activities which are unknown, shocking, or alien to the reader (this is great for introducing characters who have unusual jobs, as well as for demonstrating "a day in the life" in fantasy, science fiction, historical and other genres not set in the present day)
- **Misdirect the reader's understanding of a character** by starting off normally and then progressively twisting the scene—say, by having a character making himself breakfast

only to eventually let the reader discover that the meat the guy is grilling up so skillfully with steak seasoning and a nice wine marinade is his next-door neighbor

No matter what you do, keep your **Ben Franklin** short—or, if you insist on running long with it, make sure you begin introducing elements of conflict and change early on.

### **EXERCISE: The Ben Franklin**

Find some bit of information in your character development that makes you want to introduce something unfamiliar, misdirect the reader, or pull the rug out from under your character. Then break out your timer, and for ten minutes, write step-by-step actions that lead to an unexpected destination.

## The Snowman

**the snowman:** action that is big and bold and exciting, and then melts away to nothing, without consequences for anyone, because the author chickened out.

The world of many a beginning writer is a virtual **Calvin & Hobbes** winter horrorfest of snowmen\*. Those snowmen look scary. But, except in Calvin's mind, they never actually come through with the big payoff.

Let's pick up with where we left off with Mary, whose kids have disappeared. We have the kicked-open door, we have blood on the floor, things are looking pretty bad. We can figure the reader is pretty anxious about what has happened.

Here's where we **Snowman** it:

*Mary couldn't breathe. The front door gaped open, a mouth after the teeth had been kicked in. She could see a trail of blood that led out. She could feel her heart thudding along as if it might burst.*

*He'd come; William had come, and grabbed her children, and she had let it happen by not being with them, not being attentive enough, not being a good enough mother. In spite of everything she knew, and everything she'd suffered through, she allowed her children to fall into the hands of the same monster who had almost destroyed her.*

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\* If you're not familiar with the long-mourned comic strip **Calvin & Hobbes**, where six-year-old Calvin creates some of the goriest snowmen ever seen each winter, you're missing a joy you simply can't deny yourself any longer. Go find one of the books—they're all still in print—and introduce yourself to some of the best writing ever done in a daily comic format, and to two of the most wickedly endearing comic characters ever created.

*She heard a thud behind her, and spun around, to find Ryan walking down the hall carrying a roll of paper towels.*

*"I'm sorry about the ketchup on the floor, Mom," he said. "I promise I'll get it all up."*

*The door slammed, and she spun again, this time to find Denise back in the entryway, holding letters. "Got the mail, Mom," she said. "No bills." Denise handed the envelopes to Mary, and one from a law firm caught her eye. She opened it, and discovered a check for \$100,000, and a letter from a lawyer she'd never heard of telling her that William Hammonds, her stepfather, was dead, and that she had been bequeathed the enclosed money, along with a Bible that would be arriving under separate cover.*

*She leaned against the wall. "Where are Betty and Jim," she asked. Denise said, "They decided that they wanted to surprise you, so they're cleaning the kitchen."*

*Mary walked on unsteady legs back to the kitchen, and found her two youngest just finishing up sweeping the floor.*

While I'm sure we're all happy that things have taken such a turn for the better for poor Mary, the fact is that we have just killed our story. She's no longer under money pressure, all her kids are safe (their shocking absence was Just A Big Misunderstanding), and the man we were going to be very afraid of, and with good reason, is dead, and apparently had a huge change of heart before he died.

All the suspense is gone, all the conflict is gone, all the story is gone.

Seems pretty hopeless.

## **HOWEVER ...**

We could still pull this puppy out of the fire. Or refreeze this melting **Snowman**. I'll skip the demos I'd need to do on this one, and just tell you the different ways that I could resuscitate the story.

## Create A Character Clinic

- 1) I could back up to the point where Mary thinks everything is okay, where she has money and her two older kids, and the assurance that the two younger kids are fine, too—only to send her into the kitchen, where she would discover that her two youngest children really are missing
- 2) I could let everything including the stupid hundred-thousand-dollar check stand, and simply have it have come from a fake law firm, sent directly by William (for some purpose I haven't figured out yet) because he is still very much alive
- 3) I could back all the way up to the gaping door and the blood on the floor, and have that thump behind Mary turn out, when she turns around, to have been made by William the Stepfather

While those three solutions seem forced and pretty hokey in this bare outline form, they demonstrate the way in which the **Snowman** can become a useful technique.

A good **Snowman** is another form of misdirection, and frankly, the average writer can use all the forms of misdirection he can get. Your objective in telling your story is to keep the reader wanting to know what happens next, what happens **next**, *what happens next*, all the way to the end.

Killing off your character's conflict kills off that desire in the reader; pretending to kill it off, while very quickly demonstrating that the situation is worse than it had initially seemed, is a way of hooking the reader in deeper.

Go light on the **Snowmen**, but when things are incredibly tense, you can occasionally take a few minutes to mess around with your reader's mind, making him think that the tension is off, before ratcheting the conflict up to an ever higher level.

Use the **Snowman** to:

- Give your reader a quick breather in the tension, before wrapping a scene with a cliffhanger
- Permit a character to help a situation, before making it worse



- Reveal a trusted character as an unexpected antagonist of the main character

### **EXERCISE: The Snowman**

From your character's friends, enemies and lovers, locate one character who's status you aren't entirely happy with—or find one whom you have already decided once had a completely different relationship to your character than the one he now has. For ten minutes, without stopping to edit, ponder word choices, or otherwise slow yourself down, write a **Snowman** scene that demonstrates the calm before things change, and the moment of the twist that changes their relationship permanently.

## Door, Two Guns, No Ammo

**door, two guns, no ammo:** exciting bit of action that author hasn't thought all the way through before writing—also known as painting yourself into a corner

There's an old, and pretty useful, writing tradition that suggests unsticking a stuck story by having two men burst through a door, guns blazing.

This tradition has in its favor the genuine truth that action is a great way to get things rolling, to surprise yourself and your reader, and to make the story interesting.

It fails to mention that guns jam, ammo disappears, and you can end your character up in some painfully complicated situations that for the life of you, you can't figure out how to get him out of no matter how hard you try. And that two more guys with guns are rarely the solution to this new problem.

So say you've been racing along, your character is neck-deep in water moccasins in a remote southern Cyprus swamp, the guy who knew where he was and was coming to get him has just been killed by the antagonist, your hero's cell phone is dead, his car is underwater, and his girlfriend is in the car.

And now you realize that the only thing you can think of for him to do is die. The girlfriend, too. You can't figure out what he could possibly do to get out of this amazing mess he's gotten himself into (because when things get this bad, you're going to blame him, absolving yourself of responsibility. He did this, it's his fault, and too bad for him.)

We've all been there. Most of us, a couple of times every book.

Corners in the world of writing are relative. They exist in a fifth-dimensional space-time warp that has a funny way of changing iron-walled impassable obstacles into six-lane highways when you least

expect it. The problem with that is that you might have a deadline that will not permit you to wait for the meandering vagaries of time through the fifth dimension to drop your answer on your head. Figure, if you want to do this for a living, that you're going to have to go in after it.

The sin in **Door, Two Guns, No Ammo** is that you might be tempted to take the easy way out. To allow a passing helicopter fortuitously equipped with a monster winch to fly overhead at just the right moment, swooping down to save your hero and his equally-doomed girlfriend at the last possible moment.

Stories are about people, and people who are miraculously rescued through no effort of their own aren't very interesting to read about. People who find ways out of their own troubles are.

How, then, do you help your character find his way out of his desperate situation?

- 1) **Go back to your questions and answers.** It's time to ask more questions.
- 2) **Chose a section of the questions and answers that fits the situation you have on hand.**

For example, say that Mary did find that her youngest two children had been stolen by William, that she has to assume he'll kill them if he hasn't already, and that he has stated (through some sort of message) that he has technology which will permit him to know if she tries to contact anyone in law enforcement to help her. Further, he has demonstrated convincingly that the technology is actually in place.

We want to ask questions about what sort of skills Mary developed after her ordeal with William, to make sure that he would never be able to hurt her in the same way again. Or maybe we want to go into her friends, enemies and lovers list and see who she might know who could be enlisted, and what price getting that help would exact from her. Money, pound of flesh, "sleep with me" .... How about an ex-boyfriend who could become a love interest? How about the next-door neighbor?

If we're talking about the guy in the swamp with the snakes, we want to question his childhood or previous adult experiences that would

## *Create A Character Clinic*

give him something we could use to let him survive against the obstacles he faces, even if only barely. Was he a Boy Scout, Army Ranger, outdoor buff, geeky guy who read every survival manual ever written?

### **3) When you've found questions that suggest solutions, choose the one that seems to offer the most room for continuing conflict.**

To me, in the first example, choosing to have given Mary a paranoid set of survival skills makes the most sense if I want to make the story only about her; choosing a pushy next-door neighbor who makes demands and whom she doesn't like makes the most sense if I want to emphasize a romantic element in the story.

In the second example, I'd go with having the protagonist be a geeky guy with arcane knowledge because his responses will be the most interesting. Even though the questions such a character will raise will require the most research on my part, (What trick would scare away venomous swamp snakes? How would a man conduct an underwater rescue operation when he can't swim?), they won't be expected, and they'll make the story fun in all sorts of twisty ways.

### **4) Go back and seed little hints of these new aspects of your character's abilities or connections through earlier chapters.** (Lightly! Don't be obvious about it!) This is why I suggested at the beginning of the book that you not to go into insane detail while doing your initial questions and answers.

You never know when you're writing what direction you might need to take, and it's easier to drop a few clues through a manuscript than to find all seven thousand references to your character's Army Ranger past if you just threw the military stuff in there because you thought Army Rangers were hot, and not because the story hinged on Army Ranger background.

## **EXERCISE: Gun, Two Doors, No Ammo**

There is no exercise for **Door, Two Guns, No Ammo** until you're stuck in the middle of one, sadly. It isn't something you can practice. It'll

*Holly Lisle*

happen, though. Hang on to this chapter for when you're in trouble, and for now, just slide on.

## Naked Chick at the Opera

**naked chick at the opera:** where the writer elicits a classic triple-take from the reader by doing something so bizarre and out of place in the story that the reader is kicked clear out of the story and back to reality

Clearly we wish to avoid breaking the spell we have cast over our readers; our objective at all times is to keep their butts glued firmly to their chairs, so that we will hear such lovely words from them as “I was awake until four AM reading this book, and I had to get up at six to go to work,” and “I forgot to get off the bus at my stop, I was so into the story.”

We do not want to hear, “What were you **thinking?**”

That would be bad.

Here’s a demonstration **Naked Chick at the Opera**, just to get everyone on the same page.

*Mary ran through the woods toward the house where William had once lived. She knew the outline of the land, had spent years thinking about how she could have escaped from the house. She had a crowbar with her, and a gun, and the lockpicks she’s spent ages learning to use well. She was going to get her kids back.*

*She came over the rise, expecting to see the ramshackle cottage.*

*But the spaceship was blocking her view.*

Ba-DUMP-bump.

If you pull a stunt like that, you might as well walk up to your reader and smack him across the nose with a frozen trout.

- Surprises in stories are good things
- Surprises must have some context

- Surprises cannot drop on our heads like those falling safes in Roadrunner cartoons, or stop us cold like a naked woman walking calmly to her seat in the midst of a throng of formally dressed opera-goers

Can we have a spaceship in Mary's story? Sure.

Can it appear without any previous hint? Not without causing hostility from the reader.

Is there a place in the world for the statuesque blonde nudist classical music lover?

### **THAT DEPENDS ...**

- **IF** your writing skills are strong enough to make the arrival of the impossible seem possible
- **IF** the context makes some sort of sense
- **IF** you have foreshadowed your character's predisposition for public nudity at some previous point in the story, even if only in vague passing
- **THEN** you can walk that beauty in the buff down the aisle without derailing everything else you've accomplished.

**Point one: Writing skills** come with time and effort. Ray Bradbury says it takes a million bad words to break through to the good ones. That's a rough estimate, but the overall concept is solid.

**Point two: Context** comes from having spent time with your character and knowing that he was a nudist, or abducted by aliens, or whatever it is that has led him to this moment when he shocks the hell out of everyone. Ask more questions to get context.

**Point three: Foreshadowing** is the easy part. You just go back to earlier points in the story and insert clues, once you figure out what they are.

The question is, **Do you want a naked chick at your opera?**

In fact, you might.

## *Create A Character Clinic*

If you've set it up well, if you've dropped your clues carefully and neatly enough, if you've done all the prep work, then what you'll elicit from your reading will not be enraged disbelief, but a thrilled sense of "I should have seen that coming," and even more enthusiasm toward your story.

This, of course, is a good thing.

Doing the prep work and putting in the foreshadowing makes a good **Naked Chick** versus a bad **Naked Chick** the difference between riding a great roller coaster, and being shoved off the top of a skyscraper.

Both are clearly thrilling. You only want to do the first one again, however.

I use **Naked Chicks** in most of my books, generally toward the end of my stories. These become the points in the story that readers get so excited about that they blurt them out as enthusiastic spoilers when telling other people about what they've read—and while you'd rather not have readers spilling spoilers, if they do, you at least know you pulled them into your story and your world.

I'll tell you that there are two huge **Naked Chicks** toward the end of *LAST GIRL DANCING*, one that reveals who the killer isn't, and the other that proves who it is. I'll note that I put a lot of work into foreshadowing the shocks. But I won't include clips because I don't want to screw up the surprises for anyone who hasn't read the book.

### **EXERCISE: Naked Chick at the Opera**

Look for a place in your character development where you discovered something shocking about one of your characters. If you don't have anything that would drop your reader's jaw, then go back to the questions, select a category you like, and ask, within that category:

- What has this character done that is shocking?
- What will he do?

Once you know, spend ten minutes writing from the moment that your character does something **Naked Chick-ish**.



## The Brain Transplant

**brain transplant:** moment of impossible brilliance from a character best previously described as a blithering, drooling, idiot, (or the reverse, a moment of agonizing stupidity from your former genius-level villain or hero) that makes possible the miraculous salvation of the plot. Only not.

We're ending the book with a sin that is just a sin, only a sin, always a sin. If in the commission of critical action, your evil villain is suddenly struck rock-brained stupid, or your ordinary-guy hero abruptly passes for a Rhodes Scholar with advanced degrees in physics, biochemistry, mathematics, five languages, and Byzantine studies, you have not saved your story. You have wrecked it. You have, even worse, cheated your hero of a well-earned victory or your villain of a hard-fought loss. You have, worst of all, betrayed your reader.

We have all done this in first draft. Sometimes, unfortunately, Brain Transplants make it into published fiction, as well—but they don't do their author any good; readers hit between the eyes with a Brain Transplant solution are unlikely to buy anything further from that writer. Lest we make a habit of this egregious sin, strong medicine is in order.

- Go back.
- Delete everything from the moment when the brain transplant occurred to the end of the conflict it so tidily solved.
- Beat yourself firmly about the head and shoulders with a rolled up towel until you are no longer tempted to take the easy way out when solving writing dilemmas

When you have recovered, revisit your questions, start asking your character what skills he actually has, and figure out how these might either lend themselves to a fairly-earned solution, or how they might fail legitimately in a pinch, permitting a legitimate victory for the other side.

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In the beginning of creating your characters, in the middle, and here at the end, when you've worked them through a short story or an entire novel full of trials and tribulations, remember that you can always count on the fundamentals to see you through.

- Ask questions.
- Then ask more questions.

One good question is worth a thousand answers, and twenty or thirty of them are worth a hundred-thousand word novel.

## WRAPPING UP

This book details the process I use to create my own characters.

**I meet them and get to know them at the same time and in the same manner as the reader does,** I am surprised by the things they do, and in the end I am caught up in finding out how it will all come out for them, because while I may have the big picture, the details are as much a mystery to me as I'm writing toward them as they will be to the reader who follows after, reading what I've written.

**I don't know everything when I start.** I don't try to. Instead, I ask questions—lots of them—as I go along. Being surprised keeps the story and the characters fresh for me, and in my opinion, that freshness carries over to the reader.

**I write quickly in first draft,** not editing myself or censoring myself; I let the words fall where they may.

**I edit like a fiend in second draft,** and am ruthless and critical and vicious in cleaning up, tying up, and integrating the characters to the story. I throw away a lot of words.

**I write about people I'd want to read about**—these tend to be people who have lived tough lives, who dream big dreams, who have to overcome big obstacles. People who have never done anything or who have never had to overcome obstacles just to get to their starting point don't speak to me. They don't interest me. So I don't read about them, and I don't write them.

**BUT ...**

**People are different.** My objective is not to teach you how to create characters like mine, but to teach you how to make your characters

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more yours. If everybody created characters that were the same—perfect characters from some precise template—those characters would be predictable and dull, and so would the stories that featured them.

**My method of character creation is fuzzy, and messy.** It has a clear starting point, but no clear stopping point. No neat little templates to fill out (though I have tried some of those), no Five Easy Steps, no Character In Ten Minutes. My intent has not been to show you something easy, but rather to show you something solid which has resulted in me being able to sell my work to professional publishers and to live off the proceeds. The more you put into this, the more you'll get out of it.

**If you have done the exercises, your characters won't come out like mine.** They'll be entirely yours. They will be true to you, and your story, and your view of the world. I can't promise that your characters will sell. I think you may find that, by questioning them deeply, they get better, and deeper, and more surprising.

Finally, **this process I use is not the only way to create characters.** It's the way that has worked, and that continues to work, for me. Nothing more. It may work for you, in whole or in part, and I hope it does.

But it may not.

If it doesn't, that doesn't mean there's something wrong with you, or with your writing. It only means that you need a different process, one that will offer you a different way of looking at people and reflecting them onto your page.

There are a multitude of writing books out there (and I've read as many of them as I could get my hands on, because there is no writer alive from whom I can learn nothing). Some of these books are very good, some not very good at all, but any one of them might offer you the key **you** need to get inside your characters' lives. Start here, but don't stop here. Commit yourself to learning, question everything, exercise your mind with new ideas and new techniques daily.

Finally, I've give you the handful of keys I've found to writing success. Use them as you will.

*Holly Lisle*

- **Be persistent.** Persistence is, more than any other single characteristic, the quality that separates published writers from all the rest. Keep searching, find what works for you. Try everything, listen to anyone who will teach you, take what you can use, discard the rest. There is no authority on writing. There are only people who do it, and they're as different as everyone else.
- **Never give up on your dream.** Never believe someone who tells you that you can't do this. If you are not good enough yet, that does not mean you can never be good enough—it only means you need to work more, to learn more, and to keep going.
- **The journey matters more than the destination.** When you are writing, you are already living your dream. You are a writer, as much as any writer who has put words on the page. You do not fail if you aren't very good, because we all started out being awful. You do not fail if you are rejected. We all get rejected. You only fail if you quit.
- **You only fail if you quit.** Above all else, remember that. You only fail if you quit. So keep going.

If this is your true dream, then you can do this, and I hope you will.

With my best wishes, with my commiseration on all the skinned knees and bruised egos this job brings with it, and with my cheers for your pending successes,

Holly Lisle  
Tuesday, January 3, 2006

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## My Traditionally Published Books

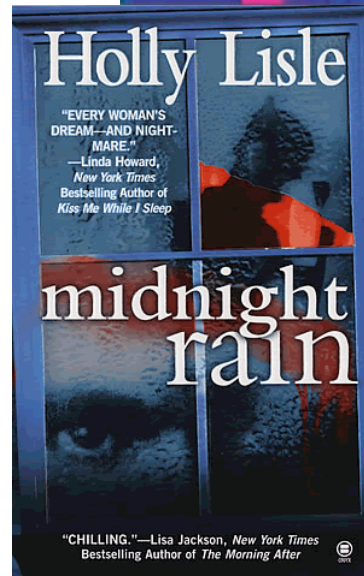
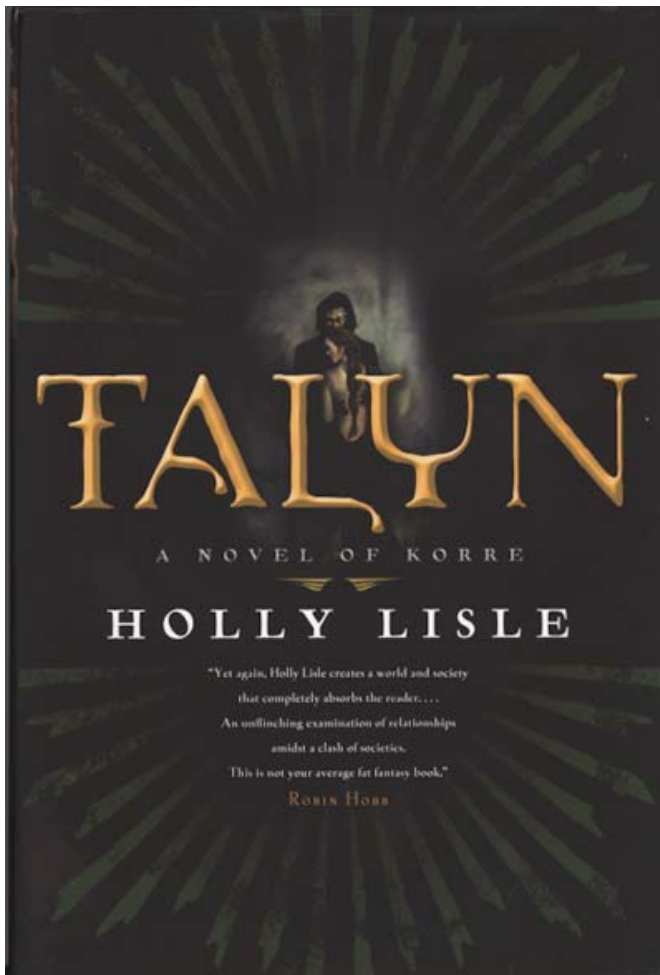
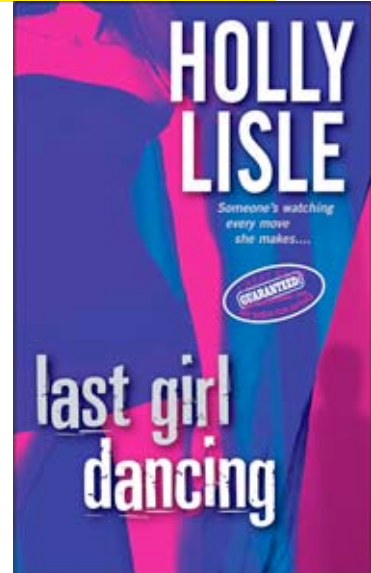
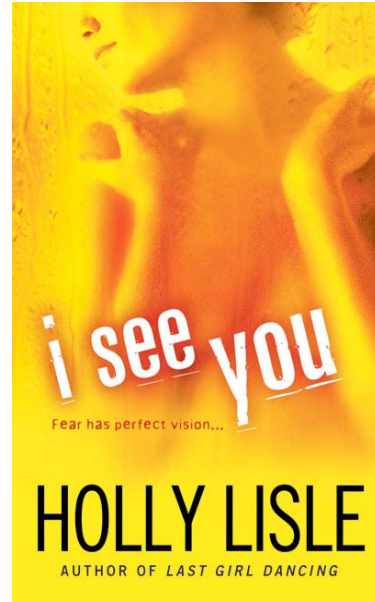
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