

5 Ways to Make Your Protagonist More Likable

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"I don't like your protagonist."

Ouch. This is just about the toughest feedback a writer can receive from a reader. A story's protagonist is its keystone; if it's weak, the entire structure crumbles.

As writers, how can we ensure that our audiences like our main characters? It's not as simple as dubbing them "The Chosen One" (though that can be kind of cool, sometimes). Instead, try these five useful tips.

1. Give Your Protagonist a Companion

Try a dog. Or cat, or little sibling, or whatever. As humans, most of us are conditioned to like animals and kids.

Therefore, we'll find ourselves liking protagonists merely by association.

For example, in *The Lies of Locke Lamora* by Scott Lynch, the titular protagonist has numerous traits that make him unlikable. He steals, cheats, has a pretty high opinion of himself, and has a fondness for gory vengeance. Yet he supports little orphan boys, so we like him a little better for that.

Be selective about the companion you choose for your protagonist. A snake, for example, will likely not have the necessary emotional resonance that you'd get from a dog, bunny rabbit, or really anything with fur. If you're going for likable, choose a companion that is itself likable to a wide audience.

2. Generate Sympathy for Your Protagonist

As an undergraduate screenwriting student, my first script was a 20s gangster drama entitled *The Honest Men*. Full disclosure: I finished it four hours before it was due and ended up getting a B-. Look, it was my first

script.

My protagonist was a guy named Frank Hammett (named after pulp writer Dashiell Hammett, because I thought I was being clever). He wasn't very likable. Frank was vulgar, combative, temperamental, and generally unpleasant.

Though I'll admit I didn't have many successes with this script, I think I actually handled Hammett quite well. Because about 30 pages into the story, Frank's partner Rock Chandler (like Raymond Chandler, get it?) has a conversation with his wife regarding Frank. That's when the audience discovers Frank's tragic backstory. He used to be a genial, happy guy — until his wife, pregnant with their unborn child, was suddenly murdered. The case remains unsolved, and no one cares to investigate. It's the moment that turned him mean.

Sympathy is a powerful emotion. Use it. If you want your audience to care for your protagonist, make them feel bad for him or her. I promise it'll get you better than a B-script.

3. Make Your Protagonist Funny

People like the class clown. Laughter is an almost exclusively human action, so characters that make us laugh are held in high esteem.

Tyrion Lannister from George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* exemplifies this point perfectly. He's got a quick wit and doesn't mind telling people exactly what he thinks — even when it's not entirely appropriate. As a result, fans of the series love him. Even Martin himself lists Tyrion as one of his favorites.

I find this technique works even better if your protagonist is one of the only funny characters in your story. Again, Tyrion Lannister is a great example. Many characters in *ASOIAF* are full of themselves, chivalrous, or generally serious. Plus, the events of the story are often quite dramatic. When there's so much seriousness in the world, contrast creates more likable characters.

Of note: While this is an effective technique, it's not right for every protagonist. Use your judgement. If you envision your character as an icy assassin who never wavers from her mission, shoehorning her into a comedic role might not work out the way you'd like. Keep humor in mind, but do what's best for your character.

4. Give Your Protagonist Flaws

This might sound counterintuitive, but I find this technique is actually quite effective. If your protagonist isn't likable enough, it might be because they're a little too perfect.

Take Superman, for example. Those who dislike the

character dislike him because he's too perfect. He has no weaknesses — aside from one glaring, albeit kind of lame, exception. He can do almost anything. He even has an iconic hairdo. I'm sure this isn't the case in all the comic books, but speaking from a general perception, Superman pretty much can't lose.

If you're reading this, I'm guessing you're a human. And as a human, you've probably noticed that we all have flaws. Work this fact into your protagonist. Nobody wants to read about someone who never makes mistakes. Such traits lead to dull reading — and some pretty unlikable protagonists.

5. Make Your Protagonist Relentless

It's okay if a protagonist isn't up to the task set before them. In truth, that's often preferable. The most compelling protagonists — and therefore the most likable — are those who won't give up, despite their shortcomings.

Consider Tristran Thorn, the protagonist of Neil Gaiman's fairy tale novel *Stardust*. He's likable for a number of reasons, not least among them because he's relentless in his quest to retrieve a fallen star for Victoria, a girl he's fallen in love with. We readers can tell Victoria isn't right for Tristran, yet we still end up liking him because he's relentless in his quest. (And, of course, because he ends up making the right decision in the end.)

Try these tips with your protagonists. Make them more likable!

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