

Black List writers on the craft: Characters (Part 5)

[Scott Myers](#)

"I don't care if your character is likable — I only care if he or she or it is interesting and entertaining and engaging. That's all that matters."

Over the years, I have interviewed 50+ Black List screenwriters. Over the next four weeks, I am running a series featuring one topic per week related to the craft of writing.

This week: *How do you develop your characters?*

Reading through all of the responses was a fascinating exercise. Once again, this group of writers demonstrates there is no one way to approach the craft. Their respective approaches to developing their story's characters vary from highly intuitive, even instinctual to the conscious use of specific techniques and writing exercises. In all cases, the goal is the same: To make the characters come alive in the writer's imagination and onto the printed page.

On Monday, we featured writers who start their character development process by focusing on real people. Tuesday, writers zeroed in on brainstorming and the importance of asking questions about and to characters. Wednesday, we checked in with writers who use biographies as a tool for

character development. Yesterday, we explored how some Black List writers go about discovering a character's voice. Today, some insider tips on character development.



INSIDER TIPS

[Carter Blanchard](#): *"For me the story forms the character. Say you're going to be stuck in a car for a thousand-mile drive with three people. You want the driver to be the world's worst driver who refuses to give up the wheel. It makes the other two nervous throughout the trip. So that character starts to take on qualities based on that first situation you came up with, which is also a story point. So as I pull the story together, the characters start coming to life and each informs the other."*

[David Guggenheim](#): *"For me, it either comes out of the concept — who is the most interesting person I could drop into this specific scenario or I first start with 'what type of person interests me' and build a story around them."*

Takeaway: The story or even the very concept can drive character.

[Aaron Guzikowski](#): *"I grew up mostly drawing, so I have to draw scenes from my head, and then I write them so it's the same sort of thing with characters. I get a feeling for that they look like and get pictures of their life and try putting it together that way, kind of like a mental collage."*

[Kelly Marcel](#): *"I surround my computer with pictures of my characters. If they exist then I use the real people... If they don't then I'll find pictures of what I think they look like and do that instead. Once I have a face I can imagine all sorts of things onto it. Then sometimes I will find odd things in old junk stores and think "Oh, Ralph would have that." So I'll buy it and put it by the picture. I end up with a desk full of bits and pieces by the time I finish writing something– it's chaos."*

Takeaway: Pictures of your characters, real or imagined, and physical objects can help to evoke characters.

[Eric Heisserer](#): *"I have a few standard tools. One is the table read. Once I have a draft that I feel is ready for eyes beyond my own, I gather a group of trusted friends together and assign them roles. I just listen to them read the script and see what they infer and what they don't get from the characters. I find dialogue that works or doesn't. We have discussion afterwards. That*

helps a lot, because you're putting these words into someone's mouth. You're hearing how it sounds out loud. That helps immensely."

[F. Scott Frazier](#): "I typically like to read back the script in one sitting and make notes along the way. By the end of it, I'll usually have a pretty good understanding of where the characters went wrong and where they can be strengthened."

Takeaway: Hearing your character's dialogue read aloud can steer you deeper into who they are, their personality, and how they express themselves.

[Geoff LaTulippe](#): "I think one thing that's focused on WAY too much is "likability". Fuck likability. Give me someone who's bleak and damaged and awful any day over someone who's just happy and saves puppies. I don't care if your character is likable — I only care if he or she or it is interesting and entertaining and engaging. That's all that matters."

Takeaway: Don't be obsessed about creating sympathetic characters, but rather focus on making them compelling.

For Part 1 of this week's series on character development, go [here](#).

Part 2, [here](#).

Part 3, [here](#).

Part 4, [here](#).

Tomorrow, we take up another angle on prep-writing as reflected on by Black List writers.