

Five Fun Writing Exercises To Deepen Your Characters

Relationships and motivations are the keys to driving your plot forward



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It can be hard to [imagine plot points](#) when we haven't taken the time to fully explore our characters. That's because [every scene in your story depends on conflict to move the action forward](#), and where does conflict lurk? In relationships.

All characters—even secondary characters—want something. They have an internal want and an external want. Their internal want is their emotional core and is

almost always some version of love. That may come out as a desire for family, or for friendship, or for understanding, or for acceptance.

Characters also have an external want, which is really just another way of saying that they have a problem that they want to solve. What outcome are they after? Usually, characters have a very specific idea about what they want to accomplish or achieve.

Understanding your character's internal and external wants depends on understanding who and what is important to them.

This is why crafting character relationships is so important — most of our beliefs and actions are influenced and motivated by the people around us. We do things because we love people. We do things because they make us angry. We do things with help. We do things out of fear.

Many of our most important beliefs come from incidents, interactions, and relationships in our memories, such as the loss of a parent, the betrayal of a friend, or the kindness of a stranger.

I've come up with five writing exercises to help you imagine your character's beliefs, relationships, and motivations.

Write a love letter.

When we think about love, we are often reduced to generic

thoughts about romance or, possibly, parental love. But love is complex and rich, and our characters experience it in many different ways. Storytelling depends on love — the search for love, lost love, unrequited love, the growth of love, and even the conflict that can arise within love. Love weaves itself throughout our lives in very different forms.

There are all kinds of love in this world, but never the same love twice. — from [“The Sensible Thing”](#) by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Much of a character’s worldview and many of their motivations can be understood and explained through love. To truly get to know your characters, think about the many different kinds of love they have encountered.

Name the major relationships in your character’s life. For those that involve love, what kind of love is it? Imagine a time that the love was visible/obvious. Now think about the status of that love at this moment. Is it lost? Is it vital? Is it waiting to be discovered? How has this love had impact, and how does it continue to impact those whom it touches?

Take a family photo.

The family is a complex web of relationships, whether that is a birth family, adopted family, or surrogate family. The family is the cradle and crucible of every character, it’s where they inherited certain traits and learned certain behaviors. Even if your main character has not interacted

with family members for a long time, the history of their life in the family will impact their present beliefs and actions.

Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be. — from [Emma](#), by Jane Austen

To “take a photo” of your character’s family, first imagine each person in the family. Draw a sketch (stick figures are fine) of this family photo. Consider where each member is placed, with whom they are standing or sitting, and what their body language might be in the photo. If helpful, you might choose to act out each part by standing or sitting as if you were each character. Then spend a few minutes writing in the voice of each character. Write about the moment immediately before the photo. How did your character feel about the photo? What did they hope would happen? How did they feel about the others in the photo?

This exercise will give you a “snapshot” of your main character’s family of origin, and how they interact with one another.

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Imagine your character's regrets.

Characters are the sum of their characteristics, relationships, and past experiences. Every action they take in your story will be dictated by the intersection of all of these parts.

Another tool for gaining deep insight into a character's decisions and actions is to explore their regrets. No one travels through life making perfect decisions in every situation. Often, we are less compassionate, less kind, less patient, or less brave than we wish we had been. Our characters are no different, and their regrets can be a fulcrum to move or inform their actions.

If you have a work in progress or wish to experiment with a new character, consider these two things:

- Your character's flaw(s)
- Your character's major relationships.

This might be a relationship with another character, with work, with their environment, or with themselves.

As you explore your character's flaws and relationships, ask yourself how those things might have played out in past situations. If, for example, your character is self-involved but loves their child, how might their self-involvement have impacted their child? Was there a missed birthday? A cry for help that went unnoticed? A decision (such as a move or

remarriage) that had a negative impact on the child? The regrets might be small or large, but these regrets can offer plot opportunities that can drive the path forward.

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Give secondary characters the first-person treatment.

When I write, there's often one character that I find very easy to identify with. Usually, that's the point of view character or the main character. But when we're trying to create a richly textured world of characters, each of whom has their own motivations and desires, it's important to take the time to explore the psyche of all of the major characters. After all, each and every character thinks that they are the main character.

Try to see the world through the eyes of one of your minor characters using the following lines as prompts. Give yourself five to ten minutes and see what you come up with. Please don't labor over this exercise; let your subconscious guide you. We often blurt out the truth when we're not overthinking things, and this piece might reveal something very insightful or useful. Here are the prompts:

- I am (one thing the character likes about him/her/themself)
- I am also (one thing the character dislikes about him/her/themself)
- I know for sure
- I wish
- I hope
- I fear
- My best friend is
- One thing I will never let happen is
- Nobody knows that I

Imagine the epitaph.

For characters, imagining the end makes it easier to see the shape of their journey. What will they be remembered for? What was important to them? Is their ending significantly different from their beginning? It should be.

In the third act of *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge overhears people talking about a funeral. No one cared for the dead man. People could only be induced to go to the funeral if lunch was provided.

It is only when he sees his own name written on the tombstone that he understands the dead man is himself.

He realizes the legacy he will leave — memories of a man universally despised — and it's this truth that causes him to change. As a result, he retools his entire life, reconciles with

his family, makes a friend of his employee, and, of course, finds a good doctor for Tiny Tim.

Although we never see a new epitaph in the book, there's no doubt that Scrooge's new actions have ensured a new ending for him.

If you're uncertain about your character's arc, try constructing an epitaph for them. It can be one that is written long after this particular story. Think about the person they eventually grow to become. It can offer insight into the way they will live as a result of the story.

I hope you have fun with these writing exercises. If you try one, please share your discoveries or even part of your writing in the comments section!