

Character Creation Exercises

The Shadow Room Exercise and Starting From Questions

From Holly Black

Imagine yourself in a dark room, with just a pool of light surrounding you and the table in front of you. Focus on your breathing, invite the character your story needs to come in, and then listen as you hear a character enter the room. Write down what you hear, what this tells you about the character, and the questions it inspires in you, but don't answer them. Next notice a distinct smell in the room that is important. Identify it, write down why it's important and what it tells you about the character, and again write down any questions it inspires but do not answer them. Next, wait for them to speak. When they do, write it down as close to word for word as you can. Lastly, describe their voice, what it tells you about them, and the questions it makes you wonder about them, but don't answer them.

Finally, from all that information, determine what your character's compelling need is and how they will go about trying to meet that need.

Starting from a place of curiosity is a great way to allow the character to surprise you, and keep you as interested in the character as you want your readers to be.

Starting from an Unconventional Place

Adapted from Dabble.com

Take a walk or go to a park. Find a really cool tree. Write about its shape, angles, health, stature, movement, scent... whatever stands out to you. Then use the same descriptions to write about [a new character](#). This can work for any significantly complicated object (even a pet).

Go to a public place and eavesdrop on a conversation. Focus on someone who's mannerisms or speech is compelling to you, and listen until you think you have a handle on their voice, then put that character through some development exercises.

Find a roleplaying game in the same genre as your story (many available online for free) Follow the character creation process. Maybe do it a few times until you get one you like.

Starting from a Real Person, a Trope or Archetype, or the Function they Serve in Your Story

Many times you'll have a character in mind. Maybe you are writing about a real person, a fictionalized version of a real person. Maybe you know the role the character serves in your plot, or maybe you have a trope or archetype in mind. Tropes and Archetypes (Jungian, Commedia Del' Arte, TV Tropes) are a useful place to start, as long as you complicate and deepen the

character to their specifics. In any case, Character development exercises can do a lot to help you make them three dimensional.

Character Development Exercises

Questionnaires and Character Development Worksheets

Proust Questionnaire

1. What is your idea of perfect happiness?
2. What is your greatest fear?
3. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?
4. What is the trait you most deplore in others?
5. Which living person do you most admire?
6. What is your greatest extravagance?
7. What is your current state of mind?
8. What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
9. On what occasion do you lie?
10. What do you most dislike about your appearance?
11. Which living person do you most despise?
12. What is the quality you most like in a man?
13. What is the quality you most like in a woman?
14. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?
15. What or who is the greatest love of your life?
16. When and where were you happiest?
17. Which talent would you most like to have?
18. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
19. What do you consider your greatest achievement?
20. If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?
21. Where would you most like to live?
22. What is your most treasured possession?
23. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
24. What is your favorite occupation?
25. What is your most marked characteristic?
26. What do you most value in your friends?
27. Who are your favorite writers?
28. Who is your hero of fiction?
29. Which historical figure do you most identify with?
30. Who are your heroes in real life?
31. What are your favorite names?
32. What is it that you most dislike?
33. What is your greatest regret?

34. How would you like to die?
35. What is your motto?

36 Questions to Fall In Love

The 36 questions:

Set I

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

Set II

1. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?
2. Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
3. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
4. What do you value most in a friendship?
5. What is your most treasured memory?
6. What is your most terrible memory?
7. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
8. What does friendship mean to you?
9. What roles do love and affection play in your life?
10. Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.
11. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?
12. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?

Set III

1. Make three true "we" statements each. For instance, "We are both in this room feeling..."
2. Complete this sentence: "I wish I had someone with whom I could share..."
3. If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know.
4. Tell your partner what you like about them; be very honest this time, saying things that you might not say to someone you've just met.
5. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.
6. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
7. Tell your partner something that you like about them already.
8. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
9. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?
10. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?
11. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
12. Share a personal problem and ask your partner's advice on how he or she might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen.

Ursula K. LeGuin's Room Exercise

I recently enjoyed reading Ursula K. Le Guin's book [Steering the Craft](#). It deals with the nuts and bolts of the craft of writing and the subtle stylistic choices that will help you take your writing to the next level. Each chapter ends with several writing exercises so you can put into practice what you learned.

One of these exercises is excellent for character development:

Describe a character by describing any place inhabited or frequented by that character—a room, house, garden, office, studio, bed, whatever. (The character isn't present at the time.)

What I love about this exercise is that these descriptive scenes are powerful to include in your story. They communicate to your reader the personality of your character without explicitly telling them your character is, say, wealthy or poor or artistic.

Writing about the Character from another character's perspective

The gossip exercise, picking two characters with wildly different opinions about the character, how would each of them describe them?

Character Writing Exercises

“Show, don’t tell” as a Character Rule

“Show, don’t tell” is a controversial rule in some corners. [limits it places on narratives and effects]. But it seems nearly universal for characters: it is almost never interesting or convincing to be told a character is smart, or sad, or whatever. You need to show the characters being smart, being sad.

So imagine your character in lots of situations, and observe them. If they are hungry, how does their behaviour change? What do they physically do? etc.

Another Leguin exercise is to imagine your character in an emotionally intense situation, whether it’s the deepest and darkest depression, the most enraptured joy, the most agonizing pain, and give yourself permission to flex your writing, trying to convey the feeling in the actual rhythm of the sentences.

Scenario writing

Trolley problem, dilemmas with two equally bad options: Would you rather? But also ordinary frustration or embarrassment, etc, dropping a glass at a restaurant, or the line to the coffee shop is too long and they’re running late. Whatever it is, even if it isn’t a scene that would or could happen in your book, you will get to know the character better and be able to write them more vividly.

Out of Context

Imagine your character out of the context of their story, perhaps in the real world with you. Have a conversation with them

Relationships and Influence

Think about the people that are important to your character, and the ways the character is influenced by and different around them.