



The Thinking Room

... about Writing: Keeping control of your characters

from: <http://www.russellweb.org.uk>

Good fiction stories are about people, not places or things. They give relief from our normal lives and enable us to have other experiences through our imaginations.

As we read, our privileged perspective gives us insights into these other lives, which are hopefully more exciting than our own realities. We see what they think and do, we learn about their hopes and passions; we share their fears and their disgraces.

Well-written characters can come to have a special meaning for us at an emotional level, wherein what happens to them matters to us. As these lives play out with each turn of the page we share yet another perspective on what it is to be human.

The trick is to create well-written characters.

A lot has already been written about how writers need the ability to observe human characteristics (physical and behavioural), combined with the skill to create engaging characterisations on the page.

When writing my first novel I was working with a situation that demanded a fairly broad spread of characters, but the lead roles would change several times as the plot progressed. These people would be taken to a place where only their cooperative resourcefulness could ensure their survival. Life-or-death action would be interspersed with moments where they could reflect on their lives. Their behavioural characteristics would evolve as the circumstances changed around them.

Being able to develop the characters in this way needed three things:

- ≡ a clear physical and behavioural definition of each character for the start of the story,
- ≡ some back-story motivations for their key attributes, to define how they might respond to the situations that will confront them
- ≡ a means to track where they were and what had happened to them

Previously I had concentrated on writing short stories and had not needed to put so much effort into defining my characters. I quickly learnt that writing a novel needs a much more organised approach.

I remembered how, as a teenager, I used to create characters for the various role-playing games that I used to run (games like Dungeons & Dragons, Paranoia, Traveller, Aliens etc.) using template character sheets. Games sheets weren't suitable for a novel but a quick search on the internet turned up **Rebecca Sinclair's** excellent "**Fiction Writer's Character Chart**". This template has been updated by Rebecca several times over the years and a number of versions can be found online. The one I used was a nicely formatted pdf template located on the website of Pathways Charter School, California.

I was initially annoyed that the template could not be completed electronically. I printed 10 blank copies and tutted as I slowly filled them out longhand for each of my principal characters. It may not have been Rebecca's intention, but I discovered that being forced to complete the forms in this way was an absolute gift. If I could have simply typed into them I know I would not



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have put even half as much thought into my characters. Working slowly in longhand ensured that I spent all the time needed at this critical stage to ensure that my characters would be as 'real' as I could make them.



Rebecca's template asks a LOT of questions about our characters, grouped under the headings of:

- Name, Nickname (and reason for that)
- Physical Appearance
- Favourites and Least Favourites, and why
- Habits
- Childhood background
- Family (mother, father etc. and relationships with them)
- Attitudes and Personality
- Behavioural Traits and Self-Perception
- Interrelation with Others
- Goals
- How they Act/React to Problems and Crises
- General Notes (favourite clothes etc.)
- Most important person in their life before the story starts, and why
- How they spend the week before the story starts

Wow, that is quite a list!

By completing the template I definitely knew a lot about my characters. I referred to these notes continuously throughout the writing and hence avoided the continuity errors that can otherwise spoil a good story. I would recommend all fiction writers to take a look at Rebecca's template: even

if you ultimately decided not to use it, I am sure that you will find it an inspiring resource.

Completing those 10 templates ticked off items '1' and '2' in my list of things needed to maintain good control of my characters.

I achieved step '3' by using a spreadsheet grid of character names versus events, with one sheet being used for each chapter in the book. In this way I was able to see at a glance which scenes my characters were in, where they were and what they were doing. Moving through the sheets enabled me to follow a timeline for each character as the story progressed.

Working in this way did feel like a bit of an administrative burden that could get in the way of 'the writing'. However, before I adopted this discipline I had already needed one extensive rewrite because of plotting and continuity problems. I am pleased to say that no reworking of the book was needed for those reasons once I started using this spreadsheet tracking!

Writers often discuss the Craft of Writing and I hope these thoughts will help you to drive towards further success in your own work.

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