

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT PART I

Before your character is believable in your reader's eyes, he/she has to be real in your eyes. One way to assure you fully develop your character before you begin writing is a character chart. Various authors utilize a variety of character charts. A writer may consult the many writing resources available or you may create your own. Set up a chart with certain headings; save it as a template you may use frequently.

Certainly one of the critical criteria is how your character appears to the readers. This needs to be established in the first few pages. Add these details in as part of the developing story not as separate lengthy paragraph. Even hair and eye color adds to the character. What if your character is not a blue eyed blonde, but is a blonde with green eyes?

Appearance also includes the character's style. Is your character most comfortable in white starched shirt and dark suit? Or does he wear denim shorts and short sleeved t-shirt even in the snow and cold? Does she have an extensive wardrobe with matching shoes and purse for each outfit? Is she most comfortable in multi-colored skirts and jangling jewelry? What is your character's dress style? What do other characters notice about him/her?

EXERCISE: Visit a mall or a community event. Sit on the sidelines and watch the people passing. Invent life histories for those who pass you based on their appearance. You want to bring a pen and paper to jot down a few notes. Try not to smirk or laugh as you are creating, you will cause a stir if you are sitting by yourself chuckling.

Appearance is only one aspect of a character and not usually the most significant. If you were solely judged by the way you looked, what would others miss about you? Your character is more than a body figure with particular hair color and eyes. Your character must stand out as an individual—different from the other characters in the story and different from characters in the same genre. **Habits and mannerisms** make characters unique.

Charles Martin in *Where the River Ends*, describes Abbie, "Whenever she fished, she bit her bottom lip. If she fished all day, she'd rub it raw." This is a habit which sets her apart. What does your character do without thinking? Is she a hair twirler when she is concentrating on solving a problem? Does he crack every knuckle on his right hand when he can't think of what to say? When she is driving does she mutter to herself "what she should have said," at the last confrontation? Is he a leg shaker? Is she a nail tapper? What does he or she do when chewing gum? **Habits** are the repeated unconscious behaviors which set one person apart from another. Give your character at least one habit which is used a couple times throughout your novel. Don't overdo it; the habit does not have to appear in every chapter. Once to set up your character and maybe again to give the reader a gentle nudge. Make sure all your major characters have very different habits.

Mannerisms are the "how's" of a character's actions and again this sets a character apart. When your character is home, does she sprawl across the chair with her leg hanging over the arm rest? Or does she sit in a chair with her feet firmly on the floor. If you picture those two characters,

two different types are set up.

What is his or her gait? What verb might fit how your character walks? Saunter, swagger, shuffle, amble, stride? Sometimes the gait changes to fit the mood of the scene as well, but we all have a unique gait. Mannerism can include how a person talks, how she eats a meal, how he behaves at a party, how she behaves with family members, how he behaves when he meets a person. As you write your novel or story, pay attention to the how a person behaves and use those actions to create believable, standout characters.

EXERCISE Go to the grocery store. Put a few things in the bottom of your cart so you appear normal and watch others. How does a person choose fruit—do they pick up each item and look at it or just dump it in the bottom of their cart? What if they know something down, do they pick it up and arrange it neatly or just walk past? If a person is shopping with a child, does she interact with the child or does he focus on the items needed not the child? Does the person read ingredients does he compare prices? What does a person in the checkout line if he is worried about the expense? Think of your own grocery shopping—do you always go to the same store? Do you shop in a certain order? Do you buy the same items? What do you do when you have more in your cart than you should buy? These are habits and a grocery store is a good place to observe others habits. Apply what you observed to your characters. No, you don't have to add a grocery scene to your story. If a person carefully examines each piece of fruit before adding it to the cart, what does that show about how exact he might be in choosing anything or making a decision? How exact is your character? Where could you put this character to show the reader this habit? If a person adds more to the cart than he really can afford and shrugs it off, what does that say about her actions? Does your character act without thinking of consequences? How can you show that in your story?

Think how appearances, habits and mannerisms can accentuate your characters. Apply all of them. Your female character is a shapely blue eyed blonde who dresses in garish clothing. The colors so loud and contrasting an observer wants to shade his eyes. What if the loud clothing is a flowing skirt with a skimpy t-shirt covered by an oversized male shirt? If the female strides into a room, makes eye contact with those staring and actively participates in whatever conversation ensues, you have set up a female who is confident and a brash style to attract attention. Use the same clothing, but the female scurries to the seat on the outskirts of the group, her eyes cast down and only responds in one word answers when asked, you have a character who is withdrawn. She wants the clothing to attract the attention so no one pays attention to the person inside.

Ah—h want to know why each to these characters act and dress this way? What events havemolded that character? Stay tuned to the next month's CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT. We'll look at how past events, preferences add to your developing character. We'll examine how a character's fears, goals and values set up character and contribute to story conflicts. Write now. Sketch out your character. What scenes in your story can SHOW your character's habits?

What will this reveal about your character?