

What's in a name? The importance of thinking about what to call the characters in your stories

Characters are crucial to any story. Yes, the plot line is important, and the story needs to have a decent flow to it to ensure that the reader remains gripped throughout the story, but without good, convincing characters, a story can just fall apart.

Writers approach the art of pulling together a story in many different ways. But one of the most common ways to plan a story is to work on building up the characters first. This can be a very time-consuming process, but it can also be very rewarding. Spending months of time building up a character to be a believable, fictional person can bring great joy, as it is almost as if you are getting to know a best friend over an intense amount of time.

It sounds all well and good, spending months of time creating a well-rounded, fictional character, but when you think about it in practice, where do you even start? Well, over time you'll find that you end up just thinking about your characters all of the time, and so every day you almost find yourselves learning new things about your character(s). However, to start off with, when you're looking to create a new character and you are staring at a blank canvas, it can help to have a few questions to focus on to start to get a basic profile of your character built sufficiently well.

A few questions to think about are:

- What sex is your character?
- How old are they?
- What is their family tree? And what about their 'tree' of friends? Who are they friends with and how are they all interlinked?
- How would you describe their personality? What are their key personality traits?
- What do they look like? How tall are they? How heavy? What colouring do they have? Do they have facial hair? Do they wear glasses? Do they have any distinctive visual features?
- What's his / her personal history? What's happened to them before now? Why has it happened? How has it impacted upon their outlook of life now?
- How does your character get on with their family? Why are there tensions?

Once you've got this information all worked out in your head, you can start to look at some of the more specific bits of information that turn the character from having a flat profile to a rounded '3D' profile.

A few questions to think about are:

- How does your character speak? Can you hear his / her voice?
- How do they hold themselves?
- How do they sit? Do they cross their legs? Do they sit on their feet?
- What's their most comfortable sleeping position?
- What makes them angry?
- What generally makes them cry?
- And importantly, what is their name?

Naming a character is almost as important as naming a baby. The name has to 'fit' them. But the luxury of character-naming is that you already know how they look and what sort of personality they have before you have to give them a name. So finding a name *should* be easier!

You can generally make a personality fit a name – it happens in real life after all. But some things to remember are that traditional names such as Alexander, William, Peter, Thomas, and Mary etc do tend to suit people who are more traditional in character, whereas names such as Megan, Francesca, and Rufus etc are better suited to younger, creative types. For your own sanity it is also worth steering clear of names that you have negative associations with!