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DRILL 35

TELL YOUR CHARACTERS' BACKSTORIES

Military units keep unit histories because they know that what came before is important to what happens now and in the future. Your characters' histories are important to *your* battle plan as well.

In order to more effectively begin your characters' story on page one, you must start writing well before that. Your characters have histories that have shaped their traits, values, and personality points. To fully understand those characters and to allow them to consistently and credibly act from those values and personality points, you need to understand how the characters came to be who they are. The best way to understand a character's biography is to write it out in the following three parts.

1. The character snapshot. This is a one-paragraph summary, written in the present tense, of who the character is now. The snapshot contains a character description that includes the character's personality points, age, profession, longings, and a brief physical description.

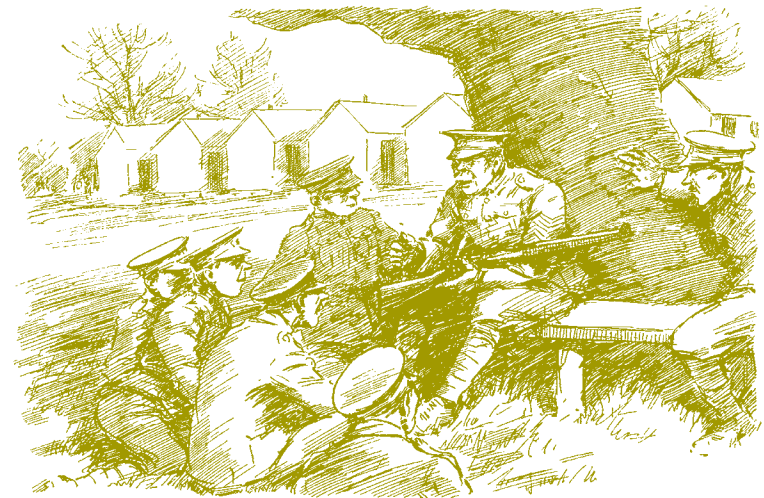
2. A day in the life of the character. This 250- to 500-word sketch outlines the events in a character's typical day and describes where he lives and works. For example, when does he get up? What does he wear to bed? What does he have for breakfast? You can write this in the present or past tense, but the key is to list specific details, and each detail should be a reflection of some part of the character's personality.

Sometimes you may find that you want your character to have a particular habit. For example, he may obsessively brush his teeth with a special toothbrush after meeting new people. If so, be sure to test this against your snapshot description of the character, and then modify either his description or the habit. Be careful not to give your character distinctive marking habits solely for the sake of being distinctive—make each habit or foible stem from the character's personality and history.

3. The character's personal history. Divide this section into two parts: the character's individual history and his family history. Write both in the past tense, because the events took place in the past.

In the first section, take the character backwards from his current age to birth, noting significant, life-shaping events and the character's approximate age at each event. You don't need to consult old calendars unless a date is critical to your story, but you do need to have the flow of events straight. There are significant events at certain ages in all our lives—entering school or puberty, going on a first date, graduating (or not graduating). These events should have individual and cumulative effects on your character and his personality.

In the second section, include biographies of his parents and grandparents. This section should also contain short character snapshots and sketches for each family member. What kind of people with what kinds of goals, values, and relationships would produce your character? What kind of people would produce those kinds of people? How did they influence your character? What did his parents and grandparents say and do that contributed to your character becoming the kind of person he is?



When you're finished, you'll likely have two to five typed pages of character biography. This biography provides you with a set of intimate details you can use or expand upon in your story. Don't worry about how good the writing is—this work is for your eyes and no one else's. You now also have a full understanding of how and why this individual will act the way he does in the crisis he's about to encounter. While your character biography may never find its way into your novel, you can be sure that your understanding of the character will—and that your character and novel will be better for it.

Perhaps your character backstories will even reveal a previously unnoticed opponent with whom your protagonist is destined to spar. If so, you'll want to give this character the special attention the opposition warrants. What special attention? The attention that begins in the next drill, of course.

RELATED DRILLS

Drill 26: Choose Your Cast

Drill 31: Distinctly Mark Your Characters

Drill 32: Discharge the Wimps

Drill 47: Plan Your Characters' Development

Drill 85: Make a Character Pass

DRILL 36

DEFINE THE OPPOSITION

In any military mission briefing, one critical question always comes up: *What's the nature of the threat?* In your novel, the threat consists of the opposition—those who stand in the way of your protagonist achieving her goals. You want your opposition to be powerful; weak opposition means little challenge for your main character and little excitement for your reader. At a minimum, you want your opposition to create apprehension in the mind of your main character and in the mind of your reader; you want them both to believe that the opposition is likely to win. To clearly define the opposition and to make your opponent worthy, follow the five steps below.

1. **Make it all or nothing.** Defeating the protagonist is the main opposition's top priority in life. If your protagonist wins (achieves her objective), your main opponent loses something of great value (in a mystery novel, she goes to jail for murder; in a fantasy, her evil reign is terminated), and there's no negotiation.
2. **Make the bad guys the ones to bet on.** Your main opposition is competent, perhaps even an expert. The opposition must be such a viable threat and so capable of winning that the deck is stacked well against your main character.
3. **Ensure there's no sitting and waiting.** The opposition is active. Like the protagonist, the opposition will take action in pursuit of an objective.
4. **Make the threat really big.** The opposition needs to be larger than life. For example, in J.A. Konrath's first Jack Daniels mystery, *Whiskey Sour*, no ordinary serial murderer would do. Instead, there's a grotesquely violent, brilliant sadist known only as the Gingerbread Man.
5. **Give it a face.** Putting a face on your opposition is the topic of a separate drill, so it's enough to say here that you want your reader to have a

degree of empathy with your opponent. To do that, you'll need to give that opponent—whether he's a mass murderer or an erupting mountain—at least one human, personal, positive quality.

How much opposition is enough? Simply put, more is more. More opposition means more conflict and a greater possibility your protagonist just might fail—which means your reader will keep turning pages to find out if he does. The opposition can include people, the elements, supernatural beings, animals, robots, diseases, forces of nature (such as volcanoes, earthquakes, and meteor showers), or any combination of the above. Choose what works best for your story.

You might think that all your characters—or at least your major ones—should receive a full definition. So what makes the opposition so special? The motivating factor for spending extra time and creative energy on your opposition is that opposition characters have a great influence on conflict, and it is conflict that drives a story. It's during conflict that your hero's character fully emerges. The richer and more developed the opposition, the richer and more complex the conflict, thus the greater opportunity for your protagonist's heroic nature to emerge.

Military planners take care to define the threat to ensure mission success. You can help ensure the success of your story by defining your opposition. Once you do, you can give your story a different and interesting twist by humanizing that opposition. To put a face on evil, turn the page.

RELATED DRILLS

Drill 18: Find Your Character in Events, Places, and Concepts

Drill 19: Find Your Character in Opposites

Drill 26: Choose Your Cast

Drill 31: Distinctly Mark Your Characters

Drill 33: Give Your Protagonist a Pointed Personality

Drill 37: Put a Face on Evil

Drill 47: Plan Your Characters' Development