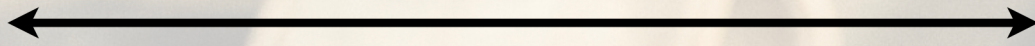


Character Development Workbook



Dan Willis

Building Great Characters

Before you can make a deep, nuanced character, you first have to know your character. Who are they? What do they like? How do they live? What do they do for fun? If all you know about your character is what they look like and their job, they're going to feel like a cardboard standee you've put up in your scenes; flat, uninteresting, and lacking in substance.

Vibrant characters are more than the sum of their details. They need hopes, dreams, fears, quirks, and problems that have nothing to do with their role in your story.

All that might sound intimidating, but it's easier than you think. This workbook has two parts designed to walk you through creating and adding depth to your characters.

Part 1: Character Development Worksheet

First is your Character Development Worksheet. This list of questions is laid out so you can copy and paste into a word processing document. Once you fill it in, you'll have a pretty good idea of who your character is and what makes them unique.

Part 2: Depth Charge

This section will help you discover what motivates your character. Once you finish this exercise, you'll know who your character really is and how the events of your story will change them, and be changed by them.

If you're ready, let's get started.

The Character Development Worksheet

Starting on the next page you'll find a list of questions for you to answer about your character. Some are broad and some are specific but all of them will give you a window into who your character really is.

This exercise isn't supposed to be easy, it's designed to make you think about more than the superficial elements of your character (although those are there too). So take your time in answering the questions. Really think about who you want your character to be, who the story needs them to be, and don't be afraid to go back and change things about your character as you develop them.

You'll notice that the Character Development Worksheet doesn't have any lines or colors or fancy formatting. That's because it's designed to be copied from here and pasted into a word processing document. From there, you can easily add as much or as little detail as you need for your character. It also makes it easy to paste in a picture of your character for reference (A simple Google image search will give you hundreds of potential faces to choose from).

You'll need one of these worksheets for every major character in your story. For minor characters, you'll use the same worksheet, but you won't fill all of it out. The sections with an asterisk (*) next to their names aren't needed for minor characters, but feel free to use any section or any question that you think relates to the specific character you're working on. They're your characters after all.

Character Development Worksheet

Name: (Meaning of Name)

Nicknames: (Origin of Nicknames)

Aliases:

Physical Description:

Sex:

Age:

Body Type:

Race:

Height:

Weight:

Hair:

- Style:

Eyes:

Accent:

Distinguishing Marks: (Freckles, Birthmark, Physical Deformities, etc.)

Corrective Devices: (Glasses, Contacts, Braces, Orthopedic or Prosthetic Devices, etc.)

Typical Clothing:

Quirks:

Story Roles:

Character's Role:

- What story function do they fulfill?
- Why Are They in the Story?

Character's Wants: (What's driving this character?)

- External Want: Their stated goal
- Internal Want: Their secret / internal goal

Character's Flaw:

Greatest Fear:

Greatest Regret:

Willing Participant:

- Is this character involved with the story plot by choice? Have they been kidnapped, blackmailed, hired, etc.

Out of Their Element:

- How?

Aware of Story Events:

- Is the character a mover in the story or is the story carrying them along?

*Family:

Immediate Family:

- Relationship:

Siblings:

- Birth Order:
- Relationship:

Relatives:

- Relationship:

Raised By:

Deceased Relatives:

Family Feuds:

Colorful Childhood Events:

***Health:**

General Health:

Allergies:

Genetic Defects:

Disabilities:

Intermittent Problems:

Lifestyle Related Problems: (Alcoholism, Drug Use, Diabetes, etc.)

Age Related Problems:

Medications Taken:

Gets Enough Sleep:

Eating Habits:

Drinking Habits:

Exercise:

Hygiene:

Smoker:

***Psychology:**

Deals with Stress by:

Easygoing / High Strung:

Fears / Phobias:

Risk Taker:

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

***Financial:**

Financial Status:

Current Residence:

- Temporarily Living:

Current Employment:

- Job Title:
- Description:
- Feelings for Job:

Retired / Quit / Fired:

Second Jobs:

Financial Drains: (Alimony, House, Cars, Gambling Debts, etc.)

***Social Interactions:**

Introvert / Extrovert:

Makes Friends Easily:

Goes Out A Lot:

- Where and with whom?

Close Friends:

Prejudices:

Expectations of Friends:

- What level of support and devotion does the character expect?

Acts Differently Around Others:

- Does the character act differently in groups than alone or in groups of friends?

Influenced by Friends:

- Is willing to let others opinions change his/her mind?

Carries Grudges:

- What kind and for whom?
- Origin of the grudge.

Respects Others Opinions:

Level of Dedication to Friends:

***Backstory:** (If your character's backstory figures into the plot, you'll want to write out the relevant parts. This is not necessary if the backstory isn't going to come up, though it can be helpful to write one to make it easier to bring your character to life.)

Depth Charge

Okay, so now you have a pretty good idea who your characters are. You might think you've got all the information that you need. Not so fast.

It's time to take your main characters to the next level.

"Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water."

— Kurt Vonnegut

The thing that makes a character deep, that makes them nuanced, is how they pursue what they want. We're not talking about superficial things, like wanting to meet a friend after work. These are the compelling, all-consuming things that drive your character. The things that keep them up at night.

We're talking about your character's "Why." The thing they want most in the whole world. This is such an essential part of fiction, and yet it's the thing most new authors overlook.

The Importance of the Why

To see how character "wants" are used in stories, take a few minutes and go through your video library. Pull out a musical, any musical. From Disney to Rodgers and Hammerstein it makes no difference.

Now queue up your favorite and start watching. Somewhere in the first ten minutes, the main character is going to sing a song and that song is going to be all about what they want. Here's a few examples:

- The Little Mermaid: *Part of Your World*
- My Fair Lady: *Wouldn't it be Lovely*
- The Lion King: *I Just Can't Wait to be King*
- Seven Brides for Seven Brothers: *Bless Your Beautiful Hide*
- Beauty and the Beast: *Belle*
- The Wizard of Oz: *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*

I could go on, but you get my point. What the main characters want is what drives them. It's so important that the creators of those stories put in a song about it to make sure you wouldn't miss it.

One of my favorite character wants is from the classic Steve Martin comedy Roxanne. Here is a [link](#) to his "I have a dream" speech. Go watch it, I'll wait.

The fire chief's dream is specific and well defined.

So, what is your character's dream? Before you answer that question, however, let's talk about how your character's dream interacts with your story.

What Your Character Wants is What the Story is About

You may have already noticed, but those songs from musicals I mentioned earlier don't just define the characters that sing them. They define the parameters of the story itself.

Dorothy dreams about a magical land over the rainbow where all her problems will go away. The story of The Wizard of Oz is about Dorothy finding that place and then realizing that it's not all it's cracked up to be.

In the Little Mermaid, Ariel gets her wish, to be part of the Human world but has to fight to keep it. In the Lion King, Simba wants to be king and the story is about the journey he must take to become a true king.

The point is this: Until we know what your character wants, we don't know what the story is about.

Write that down somewhere. Cut it out and paste it right over your monitor. It's one of the most profoundly important things you'll ever hear about writing. At least it was for me when I first heard it.

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Building Your Character Into the Story

Now that you know how important your character's want is, you might have to make some changes to your concept of your story. The obstacles your character is going to face as they move through the story should challenge their want. Not all of them, of course, but most.

How your character reacts to the story's central problem and the choices they make will depend on how those decisions fit with their want. It will color their choices and define what risks they are willing to take.

When you build your story, remember that your main character's want is what is driving the plot forward. It should be present in every scene, back behind the curtain, motivating them to go on. The same goes for your Villain. What they want will define their villainy. This

also applies to the love interest, if your story has one. All your story's major characters need to have a want.

External and Internal Wants

Let me throw something else at you. Really deep characters have two wants, an external want, and an internal want.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy wants to find a magical place where she won't have problems, but that's her external want. The lesson she learns, from Glenda the good witch, is about the courage to face her problems, and conquer them. Remember, she could have gone back to Kansas any time she wanted to, but she had to learn to believe in herself in order to do it. That is ultimately what the story is about. Not her external want, but her internal want.

In *Roxanne*, the fire chief wants to have a good and ready fire department, but that's his external want. His internal want is love. He wants to be loved and the film is split fairly evenly between his two wants.

Notice that the fire chief is aware of his internal want, but Dorothy is not. She doesn't realize her need to believe in herself until she is challenged to do so.

The Internal Want & Character Development

Your story is going to have two major arcs; the plot arc, the big events that your story is about, and a character arc for your main character. This is the story of their personal development, of how the events of the story change them.

The importance of this arc cannot be understated. In well put together stories, it is this character development arc that gives the hero the power or ability they need to win in the end.

This is a deep concept, so let me give you some examples.

Keeping with the musical theme, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel's external want is to be human. Her internal want, is to have Eric, whom she believes is her soul mate. In the end of the story, it isn't the desire to be human that compels her to confront the sea witch, it's love.

An example from film is the original *Star Wars* (now ridiculously renamed, "A New Hope"). In the film, Luke Skywalker wants to run away from his uncle's farm, join the rebellion, and have a grand adventure. He accomplishes all of this, but none of that enables him to win. If he'd used his targeting computer to take that last shot at the Death Star's reactor port, we know how it would have ended.

Instead, it's Luke's inner want, to learn of the Force and become a Jedi like his father, that saves the day. At the last moment, Luke breaks through his skepticism and fear and embraces the Force as Obi Wan's voice entreats him. That is what makes him able to win. Without the Force, Luke cannot win.

Whatever your character's internal want is, that's the thing they need to solve the story's central problem.

Your Character's Flaw

Every character needs a flaw, a critical weakness that has the ability to doom them. If the main storyline is what opposes your character's external want, their flaw is what opposes their internal want.

In Roxanne, the fire chief's internal want is to be loved. His flaw is his belief that his enormous nose makes him unloveable. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel's internal want is to marry Eric, her flaw is that she cannot speak (which would make marrying Eric easy).

When determining your character's inner want, make sure they have an equal and opposite flaw. During your story, as your main character's arc unfolds, their flaw is what will hold them back. In the end, they'll have to overcome their flaw or lose their internal want.

Finding Your Character's Want

Okay, that might have felt a bit like drinking from the fire hose. It's a complex idea and it's not easy to master. The good news is that while it will take a good amount of effort on your part, it's not as hard as you might think.

Before we get into specifics, though, I would encourage you to go through some of the films I mentioned earlier and look for the main character's external and internal wants. Have a pad of paper and take notes when you find them. You'll notice that in many musicals the main character isn't the only one to have a "what I want" song. In *My Fair Lady*, every major character except Colonel Pickering has one. See if you can find them, then track that character and see how it ends up.

Don't worry if you can't find an internal want, not all characters have them. It depends on the requirements of the story and how deep the character is.

One more note. If your character has an important backstory, their internal want (and possibly their external) will come from that backstory.

The External Want

Remember that your character's external want is literally what the story is about. If they're a detective and they want to solve that one big case, then that's what the story is about. If they're an orphan and they want to be part of a family, then that's what the story is about.

So, what is your story about? Or, if you don't know that, what does your character want? That will tell you what your story is about.

Go back to the Character Development Worksheet and fill out the External Want question. Take your time, give it some thought, and do it right. If you do, you'll give your story a rock solid foundation.

The Internal Want

This is the thing your character wants deep down inside. They may not even be aware of it. So, you're probably going to have to go digging to find it.

Ask yourself what skill or trait your character needs to win, to be victorious in the end of the story. This is something they won't have in the beginning but will be developed over the course of the story. (Like self belief for Dorothy or the Force for Luke.)

Once you know what this is, you'll need to figure out how your character develops this new skill or attitude. Map it out and put it in your story outline. It should happen naturally, gradually, so that when we get to the end, it seems perfectly reasonable that your character would act or react that way.

Go back to the Character Development Worksheet and fill out the Internal Want question. You might want to add notes about what puts

your character's feet on this path and how they develop throughout the story.

Exceptions

Now that you understand how your character's wants tie into the story you're trying to tell, let me mention a few exceptions. Not every story requires these motivations. If, for example, you're writing a detective story as part of a series, your detective probably isn't going to have much of a character arc. Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes don't change to solve their story's central problems, the mystery is both the problem and the motivation to solve it.

If you're writing romance fiction, then your character's internal want is what the story is about and the external wants are merely trappings, a backdrop that the story plays out in front of.

For most other stories, however, your characters are going to need their wants for the story to feel fully realized.

Tragedy

Just because your character is noble and pure doesn't mean they're always going to win. Conversely, they might have to sacrifice what they want in order to win. Or, even more tragically, they might have to die to stay true to their internal want. That is a character death with meaning.

Tragedy can happen when your character's internal want comes into conflict with their external want. For instance, someone who pleads guilty to a crime, sacrificing their own freedom, because the real perpetrator is someone they love. You get the idea.

Another source of tragedy is when your character cannot overcome their Flaw in time to win.

Conclusion

Now that you understand the power of your character's wants, sit down with each of your main characters and figure them out. Don't skimp. Don't settle for the easy or obvious answers, drill down deep. Give them a want that will keep them going when they're beaten and bloody and everyone is telling them to quit.

Once you have that done, work those compelling wants into your story. Tie your main character's wants to the flow of your narrative. Do this, and you'll have a rich, nuanced character.

Good luck.

Cover Photo by [Jesse Orrico](#)